



CITIZENSHIP AWARD CEREMONY OF THE P&V FOUNDATION 2025



FOUNDATION P&V

*emancipation participation
citizenship solidarity*



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THE CITIZENSHIP AWARD

2025



◀ Olivier Servais

Jessy Siongers ▶



Olivier Servais and Jessy Siongers, co-presidents of the P&V Foundation

Olivier Servais is a professor of anthropology and honorary dean of the Faculty of Economic, Political, Social and Communication Sciences at the University of Louvain (UCLouvain) in Louvain-la-Neuve and Brussels. He heads the international journal *Social Compass*, SAGE, London. He also teaches at L'Institut des Arts de Diffusion in Louvain-la-Neuve. He's co-founder of the *Carta Academica Network* which defends the commitment of academics in the public debate.

In addition to his academic career, he is also active in civil society. He has served as chairman of the Pluralist Scouts and Guides and is administrator of various social and cultural institutions.

Jessy Siongers is sociologist and affiliated to the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and Ghent University. She coordinates the inter-university Centre for Culture Research and is one of the supervisors of the Youth Research Platform. She also teaches Cultural Management and data analysis at the VUB. She con-

tributed to different national and international studies on children and youth such as the *Flemish Youth Monitor* and *Children's Worlds*, an international survey of children's well-being, and is co-editor of different books on young people and on cultural participation.

She is also an editorial member of the *Tijdschrift voor Jeugd en Kinderrechten* and national correspondent for the Youth Wiki (EU), an online database on national structures, policies and actions in support of young people in Europe.

The Citizenship Prize, celebrating its 21st anniversary this year, rewards people who put into practice the Foundation's objectives and ideals in an exemplary way by promoting a society of active, committed citizens who stand up for the welfare and happiness of others and who contribute to a more just, tolerant and respectful society for all.

The Foundation has asked a panel of 30 persons with different backgrounds (media, politics, economics, culture, social work, science) to nominate candidates for the Citizenship Award. This resulted in a list of 21 candidates. The names of the candidates who were most often chosen by this panel in a preliminary round were gathered in a shortlist with 10 candidates. The panel convened in May to select the laureates for 2025 out of this shortlist (jury).

The 21st Citizenship Award honours two Belgian women whose commitment to truth, justice, and human dignity is exemplary: Yasmien Naciri and Colette Braeckman. Through their respective journeys, they illustrate the power of engaged voices—whether expressed through writing, in the public sphere, or on social media—and their essential role in our society. Two women, two generations, one shared struggle for truth, justice and human dignity.

YASMIEN NACIRI

Yasmien Naciri is a lecturer, author, opinion maker, marketing consultant, and a true go-getter. For over ten years, she has been actively involved in multicultural aid organizations and youth work. She has published inspiring books and fights against prejudice and class-based injustice. In addition to her writing, she serves as a board member at institutions such as the *Hannah Arendt Institute*, *Formaat Jeugdhuiswerk Vlaanderen*, and *Ancienne Belgique*. Her work focuses on inclusion and combating inequality.

According to the jury of the Citizenship Award, Yasmien Naciri embodies, in an impressive way, the engaged citizenship that the P&V Foundation seeks to reward and strengthen. Her sharp pen, courageous voice, and unwavering commitment to social justice make her a contemporary role model who dares to address uncomfortable truths.

She expresses her engagement both in words and actions – not only through opinion pieces, books, and media appearances, but also through her concrete work on the ground:

from youth initiatives to poverty reduction, from diversity campaigns to founding solidarity organizations. She understands better than anyone the importance of not just speaking about people in vulnerable positions, but with them, and giving them a voice.

With her most recent book, *Klassenjustitie* (Class Justice), she opens our eyes to the structural inequalities in our legal system and raises fundamental questions about the blind spots in our democracy. She dares to stand up against injustice, whether it manifests as hate speech, institutional discrimination, or selective empathy.

The jury praises her as an example of what it means to take civic responsibility for the collective well-being. Her journey inspires young people and citizens across the country to speak up, get involved, and refuse to remain silent in the face of injustice. She reminds us that vigilance is a civic duty.





COLETTE BRAECKMAN

Colette Braeckman has been a senior reporter at Le Soir for 50 years. She has covered numerous world events, including the Carnation Revolution, the fall of Ceausescu, and conflicts in Africa, with coverage of Rwanda and Congo that had a global impact.

The author of numerous books, she is an omnipresent voice in civic struggles in Belgium and around the world. A pioneer in journalism and as a female foreign correspondent, she co-founded the first journalists' association in Belgium. A citizen journalist, she is everywhere, always serving the most forgotten, the most martyred, the most resilient citizens, often at the risk of her own life and even if it means upsetting those in power.

Today, at the age of 79, she remains active, recently travelling to Goma to report on the current situation. Her inspiring phrase, 'Elsewhere begins on the sidewalk across the street,' sums up her commitment.

The jury praised her courage in standing up for the truth, defining her as the very essence of a committed journalist. In this era of fake news, her determination to always stand up for the truth is undoubtedly an exemplary stance for young people. The jury also recognised her impressive career and lifelong commitment to bearing witness and highlighting the atrocities of geopolitical conflicts.

SUPPORTED PROJECTS

Yasmien Naciri and Colette Braeckman were given the opportunity to support a project that is in line with the mission and values of our foundation.

The Hannah Arendt Institute

Yasmien chose the Hannah Arendt Institute, a centre for knowledge dedicated to strengthening democracy in a diverse and rapidly changing world. Based in Mechelen, the Institute connects research, policy, and practice around the themes of citizenship, diversity, and urbanity. Through research translation, education, public dialogue, and collaborative projects, the Hannah Arendt

Institute fosters active participation, critical thinking, and shared responsibility among citizens, professionals, policymakers, and young people alike. In doing so, the Institute contributes to a more inclusive, resilient, and democratic society, where everyone feels empowered to act and to take part in shaping our future.

Bureau pour le Volontariat au Service de l'Enfance et de la Santé (BVES)

Colette chose BVES (Office for Volunteering in the Service of Children and Health), founded in 1992 by Mouna Murhabazi, and one of the leading Congolese NGOs committed to defending children's rights, with an influence that extends beyond the borders of the Democratic Republic of Congo, particularly in the Great Lakes region. BVES is committed to protecting and defending the fundamental rights of children who are victims of economic and social marginalisation, as well as children who are victims of armed conflict (street children, children in detention, unaccompanied children, child soldiers, children who are victims of exploitation, etc.), children separated from their families. With

the spread of war in eastern Congo, the BVES's scope of action has expanded: teams are now operating in North Kivu and Ituri, in South Kivu, and as far as the shores of Lake Tanganyika.

Jan Nolf, honorary justice of the peace and laureate of the Citizenship Award 2016, and Yvon Lammens, film and documentary director and producer, will pronounce the laureates' laudations.

Besides the financial support, the laureates will receive a woodcut on paper from the artist Philip Aguirre y Otegui.



© Exile- 2017 by Philip Aguirre y Otegui

THE P&V FOUNDATION

The P&V Insurance Group, which originated from the cooperative movement, established the P&V Foundation in 2000 and is its main sponsor. The Foundation operates in total independence and its mission is to fight the social exclusion of young people and promote active citizenship. Based on the most important values of the social economy, the Foundation emphasises active participation, independence and social responsibility among young people. The P&V Foundation was recognised as a foundation for public utility in 2005. The Foundation is constantly working with young people and aims to further enhance its approach by involving youth at all levels of its projects.



The objective of the P&V Foundation is therefore to provide young people with a range of resources that appeal to their talents and convictions. It wants to encourage young people to show solidarity, to develop their sense of citizenship by helping them to express their ideas, to cooperate, to respect each other and

to increase their sense of responsibility. Because young people are the adults of tomorrow, the P&V Foundation aims to increase their opportunities for development by means of projects young people select themselves and in which they participate. In parallel with its mission to combat social exclusion of youngsters.

FEELING YOU(TH). MENTAL HEALTH OF YOUNG PEOPLE.

With its "Feeling You(th)" project, the P&V Foundation aims to promote the mental health of young people. The project consists of three phases: research, project call, and action, all accompanied by a youth forum. This project offers around twenty young people aged 18 to 27, from diverse backgrounds and from all over Belgium, the opportunity to gain experience in active citizenship. After participating in the first research phase, the youth forum gathered for a weekend to discuss with the pre-selected organisations that pitched their projects.

To promote mental health among young people and prevent mental distress, The Youth Forum of the P&V Foundation finally has selected 16 projects aimed at improving the mental well-being of young people in the following five areas:

- Physical activities, coaching and personal development support
- Promoting social connection, encounters and inclusion



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- Offering a listening ear and support in and around the school
- Co-creation: sharing and experimenting through art and expression
- Raising awareness and taking action through (social) media

In 2025–2026, the organizations will have time to carry out their projects, after which we will organize a closing event to present all their findings, together with our Youth Forum.

More information about the 16 winning projects? Scan this QR code



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P&V GROUP ACADEMY – SECOND WAVE

Last year the P&V Foundation and the P&V Group launched the pilot project of the P&V Group Academy to help young people confidently embark on their professional journey. The P&V Group Academy offers young people an inclusive training and support program within our organization, with the possibility of accessing a 12-month paid internship and potentially a job. The program includes theory, general skills, and practical immersion in the insurance world, with the valuable support of mentors and sponsors.

The first year has been a rich learning experience. The P&V Academy has enabled young adults with no work experience to take their first steps into the world of insurance. Of this the first cohort, four trainees obtained employment contracts within the P&V Group. One young adult found another opportunity in the insurance sector. Another trainee decided to go back to school and obtained a degree. Finally, two others have continued their job search empowered by our partner StartPeople, one of the largest recruitment agencies in Belgium.



The second edition of the P&V Academy programme was launched before the summer, with an information session and a three-day bootcamp. In September 2025, seven young adults began their professional journey within the P&V Group through a six-month paid internship, which is renewable.

The P&V Group Academy was made possible thanks to, among others, the network of partner

non-profit organisations whose core mission is to guide young people towards the job market, such as Capital, Déclic, Duo for a job, Backstage Network, Cité des Métiers and YouthStart. Their partnership is essential to the success of our mission. With the P&V Foundation, the P&V Group pursues goals of inclusion and non-discrimination as part of its societal commitment.

More information? Scan this QR code.

ENGAGEMENT AND VOICES OF THE YOUTH

As part of its series of inspiring encounters, the P&V Foundation organised a day dedicated to the voices of young people. The aim was to discover initiatives that place young people at the heart of their decision-making process.

During “Engagement and Voices of the Youth”, the Foundation gathered researchers, field practitioners, and young people to exchange ideas and experiences on how youth voices can be integrated into all domains: in the daily operations of organizations, in governance, research, and public policy.

We had inspiring presentations and interactive debates, showcasing best practices such as Child Citizen Lab (VUB), Forum des Jeunes (Fédération Bruxelles-Wallonie), Jong Panel Viervulver; Molenbeek Rebels Basketball, Play4Peace, ULB Engagée, Youth Advisory Panel Plan International Belgium, and interactive discussions with committed young people like Rayan Awad, Arno Berck, Adélaïde Charlier, Youssef El Haddaji, Maïté Meeûs, Virginie



Nguyen Hoang, and of course, our very own Youth Forum with the concluding words delivered by Adam Lamarti and Inès Dehogne.

This event was also an opportunity for the Foundation to launch the results and lessons learned during the Connecting Youth project. This publication outlines the steps taken by the

Foundation to include young people in its own youth forum.

More information? Scan this QR code and have a look at the interactive brochure ‘Connecting Youth’ published for the occasion!



© Women Wave Project

PROJECTS INITIATED BY YOUNG PEOPLE

In addition to its own projects, the Foundation also supports projects initiated by young people. This year, the Foundation has decided to support two projects led by two former winners of the Citizenship Award, Maité Meeûs and Virginie Nguyen Hoang.

Women Wave Project

The Women Wave Project is an activist and scientific expedition led by six French and Belgian young women, including Maité Meeûs, Camille Étienne, Adélaïde Charlier, Coline Balfroid, Lucie Morauw, and Mariam Touré, who are sailing to the UN Climate Change Conference, COP30, in Belém, Brazil. They all come from different backgrounds: climate justice, gender equality, human rights, and grassroots youth movements. Together, they advocate for an intersectional approach to ecology. Among other things, the aim is to raise awareness of the impact of climate change on women, who are often the most affected but the least represented.

Follow their journey on Instagram!

Résonances- Collectif Huma

The HUMA collective, composed of four photographers and journalists including photojournalist and winner of the Citizenship award 2019, Virginie Nguyen Hoang, is a non-profit association dedicated to offering expert insight into the production of reports and editorial projects.



The exhibition Résonances looks behind the scenes of photojournalism, from the choice of a report to its development and dissemination. Through photographic series and reflective texts, the public – and especially young people – are invited to reflect on the context and influence of images in our society.

More information? Scan this
QR code



A CITIZENSHIP AWARD WITH AN EYE FOR VALUES

In order to emphasise and add resonance to its ideal of citizenship, the P&V Foundation organises its annual Citizenship award, which is awarded to Belgian or foreign persons, initiatives or organisations that have contributed to an open, democratic and tolerant society in an exemplary way.

2005

Fadéla Amara (Ni Putes Ni Soumises) and Job Cohen (Mayor of Amsterdam) were the first to receive the Citizenship Award in 2005.



2005

2006

In 2006 the prize was awarded to singer, writer and sculptor Wannes Van de Velde and director duo Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne.



2006

2007

Senegalese human rights activist Khady Koita, president of the European Network for the Prevention of Female Genital Mutilation and author of Mutilée, received the award in 2007.



2007

2008

In 2008 the prize was awarded to two ladies: Jeanne Devos, human rights activist and founder of the National Domestic Workers' Movement (NDWM), and Simone Süsskind, president of Actions dans la Méditerranée.



2008

2009

In 2009 two Belgian organisations were rewarded for their efforts to promote intercultural dialogue and awareness of citizenship: Kif Kif and Les Territoires de la Mémoire.



2009

2010

In 2010 the panel selected a duo that was awarded for its endeavours to promote the reintegration of prisoners. Jacqueline Rousseau founded Adeppi (Atelier d'Education Permanente pour Personnes Incarcérées) in 1981 and Guido Verschueren has provided humane leadership at the prison in Leuven for 30 years.



2010

2011

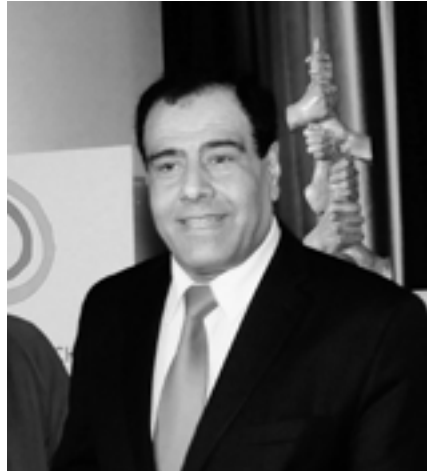
In 2011 the Citizenship Prize was awarded to Stéphane Hessel, diplomat, human rights activist and author of *Indignez-vous!* (Time for Outrage!), which was sold over four million copies worldwide.



2011

2012

In 2012, the P&V Foundation awarded its 8th prize to Dr Izzeldin Abuelaish, author of the book "I Shall Not Hate".



2012

2013

Jan Goossens, the artistic director of the KVS (the Brussels Royal Flemish Theatre), received the award in 2013. He has led the KVS to an urban and contemporary theatre, focusing on diversity in his own country and on cultural wealth elsewhere in the world.



2013

2014

In 2014, the Citizenship Award was given out to two people who give, on a daily basis, opportunities to socially vulnerable people to participate in society: Reinhilde Decleir, actress and instigator of the Theater Company «Tutti Fratelli» and Ho Chul Chantraine, Founder of Agricover, a cooperative company with social and ecological objectives.



2014

2015

The Citizenship Award 2015 has been accorded to Eric Domb, founder of Pairi Daiza, and Frans De Clerck, co-founder of Triodos bank Belgium.



2015

2016

In 2016, Michel Claise, investigating magistrate specialised in financial crime, and Jan Nolf, honorary justice of the peace and critical observer, were the designated laureates for the 12th citizenship award.



2016

2017

In 2017, the Citizenship Prize was awarded to Paul Collier, professor of economics at the University of Oxford and influential thinker on migration and development economics.



2017

2018

Michel Pradolini received the Citizenship Award in 2018. He is the driving force behind and chairman of the widely supported social football club City Pirates.



2018

2019

In 2019, the Citizenship Prize was awarded to journalists Virginie Nguyen Hoang and Geert Mak. Two laureates who bring out a broader story and vision of society in an accessible way, by means of testimonials and portraits of ordinary people.



2019

2020

In 2020, the Citizenship Award went to a female journalist for her active and militant citizenship: Waad al-Kateab.



2020

2021

In 2021, the Citizenship Prize was awarded to Jean Drèze, a Belgian-born Indian development economist and social activist.



2021

2022

In 2022, the Citizenship Award was given to Dorottya Rédei, a Hungarian academic and LGBTQI+- and human rights activist.



2022

2023

In 2023, the Citizenship Prize was awarded to Adil El Arbi, a Belgian film director and screenwriter of Moroccan descent with a social commitment to young people.



2023

2024

In 2024, the Citizenship Prize was awarded to Maïté Meeûs, a Belgian militant feminist, and Seppe Nobels, a Belgian chef and social entrepreneur. Two Belgians who work for greater social justice by giving a voice to the less visible.



2024

THE PRIZE WINNERS 2025



THE LAUREATE

YASMIEN NACIRI

Interview by Gie Goris



Yasmien Naciri is a busy bee. She does about three full days of volunteer work per week. She is an opinion maker, speaker, author. She is an independent business consultant. And above all, she is a lecturer in international entrepreneurship, consumer behaviour, and project and change management at Karel De Grote Hogeschool in Antwerp. Can we call her an influencer in today's terms? 'No, thank you', she laughs, 'because then I would have to remain silent about the issues that really matter.'

The jury of the Foundation P&V Citizenship Award appreciates the fact that she does not remain silent. For her, commitment is a matter of words and deeds, the jury notes. A choice she shapes 'through opinion pieces, books and media interventions, but also through concrete efforts in the field – from youth work to poverty reduction, from diversity campaigns to the establishment of solidarity organisations.'

It runs in the family

We meet under the glittering ceiling of Café Le Royal, in Antwerp Central Station. To talk about the things that really matter. But in contrast to the gilded environment, our conversation begins in the dark of a deep shaft. More specifically, in the depths of the coal mines of Limburg. Grandfather Naciri, originally from Morocco, chose a life as a miner in Belgian Limburg. Contrary to the widespread cliché in Belgium, he was not an impoverished illiterate, but a descendant of a family that contained farmers and traders, as well as scientists and entrepreneurs. In the distant past, his ancestor Sidi Mohammed bin Nasir founded the Zawiya Nasiriyya, one of the most important Sufi movements in the Islamic world. To this day, the distant family is involved in the management of this large spiritual foundation, which includes one of the most prestigious libraries in the country. Yasmien's mother's family is just as diverse in social backgrounds, with farmers and manual labourers as well as highly educated people. Her brother is a doctor; his daughter a surgeon and his son an engineer – but she herself grew up in a farming family. As a girl from a

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YASMIEN NACIRI

large family with modest means, a university education was not really an option then.

Start a conversation about Limburg's mining and migration history, and at one point, your interlocutor will come up with the line that is repeated by every former miner in the region: 'Down in the mine, we were all black.' Yasmien Naciri does not make for an exception. With this mantra, both Flemish miners and migrant workers in the 1960s and 1970s tried to belie the sometimes subtle but often tangible forms of racism that was also present in the mining towns and surrounding villages in the Kempen region. After all, the coal dust that made everyone equal was washed off at the end of the eight-hour shift, after which the miners returned to their own separate realities. And to inequality and mutually cherished prejudices.

As a migrant worker in Belgium, grandfather Naciri hoped to accumulate capital more quickly than he could in Morocco, and then return home. Neither would happen, and when the Limburg coal mines closed, the Naciris moved from Genk to Mol. In the grandparents' house, the children grew up under the ever-

watchful eye of King Baudouin, whose official portrait adorned the living room. After all, it was on a “royal invitation” that grandfather Naciri had come to this kingdom on the chilly North Sea. However, the promises made of a warm welcome and opportunities for the children were not really fulfilled by the Belgian state. Most children of “guest workers” were sent straight to vocational education by the study guidance counsellors. ‘Both my father and my mother, who ultimately raised us, are intelligent people’, says Naciri. ‘People who had much more intellectual potential than the meagre opportunities they were given.’

Success is more than an individual matter

Instead of the successful return that her grandfather originally dreamed of, the reality in which his granddaughter Yasmien grew up was marked by poverty. For her, it is important to call that past by its name. ‘Because poverty is all too often made invisible as soon as success follows, whether in the form of a degree or a thriving business. In that case, one is then quickly exploited as an example that success is possible, if only one has the ambition to make it. But things are not that simple. Yes, you need

resilience and perseverance to escape poverty, but much more is needed. Luck, for example. Or teachers who give you extra attention and encouragement. A network that opens up for you. Success is never simply an individual matter.’ At the same time, she emphasises how appalling she finds the media’s obsession with poverty and misery. ‘Poverty porn is the last thing we need,’ she almost exclaims. But no worry, the customers at Café Le Royal are too absorbed in their own concerns to be startled by her barely contained emotion. Poverty was part of the experience of growing up, and that experience is the deep source that drives her time and again to take action against poverty, against exclusion, against injustice.

Growing up, it turns out, is not just a matter of opportunities and limitations, of family, migration or income. It is also fundamentally linked to a place. ‘I still kiss my hands that I grew up in Mol,’ says Naciri. ‘The Antwerp Kempen region is seen as cut off from the city and all the opportunities it offers, but for me, the Kempen has been a blessing. The attention I received at school is hard to imagine in today’s super-diverse, metropolitan

classrooms. My teachers chipped in money so that I could still go on school trips – how do you do that when your whole class is full of children from vulnerable families? My fellow

© Sophie Nuytten



pupils and their upper-middle-class families always welcomed me warmly into their homes and lives, which gave me self-confidence. I also learned that entrepreneurship was possible, and above all that you could take initiatives to have a social impact or to build a more sustainable world.'

A school is a village

We linger for a moment on the question whether teachers in super-diverse classrooms have the opportunity to see and stimulate the talent of each child – when there are so many social issues they carry in their schoolbags. There are already far too many education specialists in Flanders, laughs Yasmien Naciri, before volunteering her opinion anyway. 'Education today must stop expecting everything from the individual teacher and instead focus much more on creating a supportive ecosystem in every school. You also need youth workers and social workers in schools to identify both problems and opportunities among all these different children and to address them. That's the only way we'll get to the bottom of aggressive or apathetic behaviour and involve parents in the right way. Not in a reproachful way, but in

a supportive way.' She knows from her own experience that the latter is crucial: 'Education should reduce the gap between rich and poor; it should lessen the impact of where you were born. You don't do that by constantly saying that it's the parents' responsibility. The focus of education must remain on the child. So that their future is not entirely dependent on the mental state or social class of their parents.'

A society that is careless with the educational opportunities of vulnerable children pays a high price for it. Yasmien Naciri has long been convinced of this. And since researching her book on class justice, even more so. 'Mothers told me that the drug mafia specifically targets children who are struggling at school. For them, the easy money from drug crime is particularly attractive because the longer route via qualifications and real employment is cut off so early on. Yes, parents are also responsible. But imagine what real attention in sixth grade or second year of secondary school could have meant for those boys! We know that it takes a village to raise a child: why don't we build those villages in and around our schools?'



'I will make my own choices, thank you'

Getting opportunities and creating opportunities: that could be a brief summary of Yasmien Naciri's journey so far. But there is more to it than that, because there are many

junctures between one thing and another; and there are constantly choices to be made. Yasmien proved to be very adept at this from an early age. One of her most notable choices was when, at the age of twenty-five, she decided to wear a headscarf. Not that she received an unbearable amount of criticism for this – although some more conservative Moroccan youths grumbled that with her unorthodox lifestyle and opinions, she should leave the hijab alone, while right-wing trolls used this simple symbol of Islamic faith to dismiss Yasmien, her initiatives and her moderate views. 'I have always been very clear to everyone,' she says: 'Don't bother, I decide about my own life, and I alone will do that.' This is in line with the basic belief that applied at home, namely: think for yourself, choose your own path. But that thinking and choosing was, of course, accompanied by a lot of searching and doubting. Was she religious, and what did that mean? Why did God allow violence and injustice if he is almighty? What is haram and what is halal, and how important are these things anyway?

'When I finally decided to wear a headscarf, it was not welcomed enthusiastically at home. My parents believed that faith in your heart and did not need to be displayed on your head. They believed that you did not need to prove your inner experience to others. I agreed with that, but I wanted to find out whether that choice would strengthen me spiritually and guide me morally.' The answer to

that double question was rather disappointing: little changed in her heart and spirituality, while in the eyes of others she became very different – on the street this led to verbal abuse and barely avoided physical aggression. The fact that the headscarf disappeared again after a few years was not a concession to her opponents, but a recognition that her spiritual quest had to take a different path. Because, to be clear, the search itself has not been abandoned and is perhaps more important than the comfort of finding.

'Everyone needs meaning,' she says. 'I see that in both non-believing friends and believing peers. And the core of any spirituality always remains the compassion you show for other people. Making room for others, suspending judgement, and thus looking at the other with love so that you can help him or her. A good exercise is to look at prisoners. A spontaneous attitude is judgemental, because they have broken laws and harmed others – sometimes in brutal ways. But let go of your judgement, place the crime in its context, and you arrive at what our constitutional state is meant to be: a reality offering second chances, restoration, humanity. True spirituality is therefore about connecting people.'



© Bas Bogaerts

Without solidarity, there is no justice

The importance of personal, individual choices is sometimes at odds with our need for connection, community and collective interest. Yasmien Naciri is acutely aware of this tension. 'I belong to a community, but I am not of that community,' she summarises succinctly. In other words, she does not want social norms and expectations to become more important than personal choices and goals. She explains that this community pressure is certainly not limited to religious or ethnic communities; she also encounters it in political or ideological groups. At the same time, she has also come to realise that rejecting all community affiliation is not a satisfactory alternative – because it quickly becomes egocentric and lonely. 'For many people, a community in which you share your background, language, religion or beliefs with others is also the springboard they need to dive into the social ocean with all its possibilities and threats.'



'My social engagement always oscillates between individual human rights and social solidarity. You cannot separate the two, if only because neglecting the human rights of others ultimately undermines your own rights. That is perhaps the basis of my active citizenship: it is both a commitment to the rights of others and a source of meaning for myself; it is standing up for the interests of those I love and those who are strangers to me.' With this

last point, Yasmien Naciri touches on a key aspect of her commitment: solidarity cannot be limited to those who are like you. And so, she concludes, the call for "nativist" solidarity is in fact a politics of exclusion, even if slogans such as "Our People First" work well in uncertain and difficult times. At the same time, she sees that social democrats in Europe are attaching less and less importance to solidarity and replacing it with human rights. 'But what good are individual rights without accessible healthcare? What good are they if the government itself then organises shortages in the reception of asylum seekers? What are human rights for the homeless who live in a dead-end street? Without solidarity, which must always be nurtured, deepened and broadened, you cannot build a just society.'

Rolling up our sleeves

In 2018, Yasmien Naciri published her first book: *Wij nemen het heft in handen* (We are taking matters into our own hands). It was the result of her early work as an opinion maker: columnist for *De Morgen*, guest on

De Afspraak, and so on. But perhaps even more than that, this collection of essays on (among other things) work, education, mutual integration and multilingualism was a reflection on her life as a “doer”. Because even before Naciri held up a mirror to herself and society, she had rolled up her sleeves and got to work.

‘I got that from home,’ she says. ‘My mother often offered shelter to people who had nowhere to go, and she still does. We lived by the Arabic saying that where there is room for five hands in the couscous bowl, there is always room for a sixth.’ This led to a lot of volunteer work at a young age. And she was only nineteen when she set up her first initiative: Amana. This raised funds – literally euro by euro – to pay for food parcels for the homeless. She went around to lecture about it, even in the Netherlands, which resulted in more and more funds being raised. Until she realised that food parcels did not offer a structural solution, but on the contrary made people dependent. ‘But a structural approach in Antwerp or Brussels was too ambitious for us at that time, so the

initiative was completely reoriented towards the needs of villages in Morocco. The costs of doing something there were lower and there was much less bureaucracy in terms of social entrepreneurship and solidarity, so we started drilling wells and laying water pipes. This quickly yielded good results, although we did have to deal with attempts to exploit it politically. Then we received requests from school administrators to invest in better girls’ toilets, which led to the construction of entire schools.’

That went very well, but Naciri always wants to be able to question things and adjust her actions. When she was able to delve into the knowledge and experiences of development work at the Institute for Development Management and Policy (at the University of Antwerp), she realised that even those wonderful initiatives did not really contribute to structural change. ‘We made it all happen with a lot of volunteer effort, but the bottom line was too often that I was convinced I knew the solution to a problem that affected other people. What I learned in the meantime was the importance of collaborating with

other people, organisations or institutions that have similar objectives.’ However, this is difficult when these different players are also competitors for ever-dwindling resources... ‘Perhaps self-reflection is the most important thing: doing, thinking, learning, growing. There is beauty in the early stages of a volunteer initiative, where everything is brought together by idealists, but that is not enough to change the world. Nor is it sustainable.’

For Yasmien Naciri, acting before speaking also means that she wants to have sufficient knowledge and experience before she expresses her opinion on a subject. ‘That’s why I still spend at least three days a week doing voluntary work,’ she emphasises. It is in these boards and commitments that she gains the insights to speak about education, poverty reduction, youth work, the labour market and entrepreneurship – the issues closest to her heart. Naciri is or was board member at the Network Against Poverty, Formaat Jeugdhuiswerk Vlaanderen, the Ancienne Belgique, SAM vzw, Hannah Arendt Institute, and she is a government commissioner at Mukha, a councillor at the Language Union

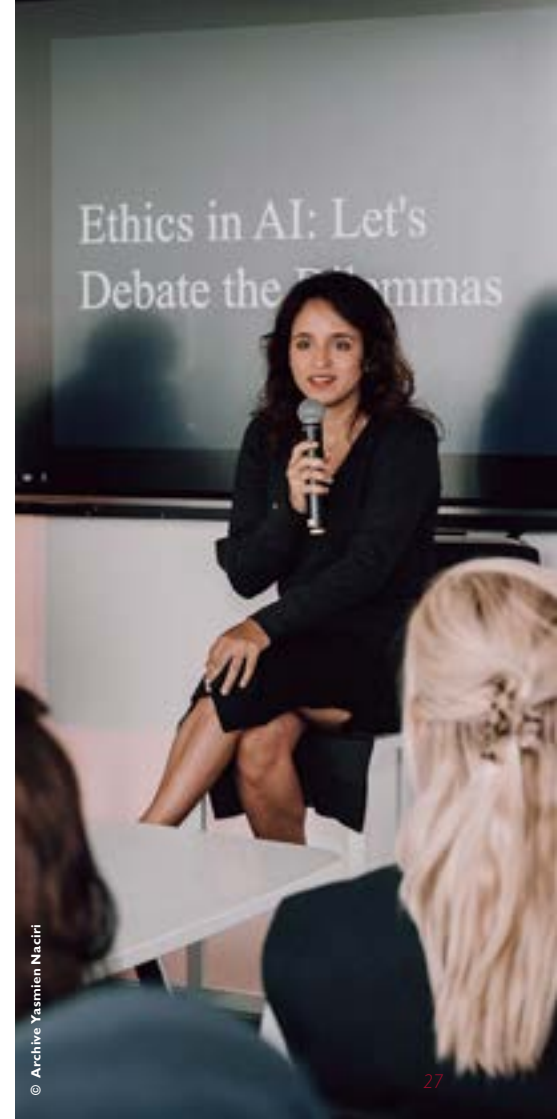
and a member of the professional committee at Literatuur Vlaanderen... She notes that the knowledge these engagements bring is often underestimated in society, and certainly on social media. But that does not prevent her from increasingly finding her own voice and using it. The doer has also become an opinion maker and researcher. And in barely a decade, the fresh, new voice on the opinion maker's block has grown into the author of an influential book on class justice.

How blind is Lady Justice?

She has no legal education. She knows, and she is regularly reminded of it. 'In *Class Justice: How blind is Lady Justice*, I therefore do not venture into writing a legal book. I do not analyse legal texts. I approach justice as a concerned citizen, and that is important because the rule of law should not be left to legal professionals. It is about society, and we are all responsible for that together.'

Naciri was inspired to write this book by the controversy surrounding the Reuzengom trial, following the death of Sanda Dia. The widely shared feeling that the courts were applying

double standards shocked her too – but she did not want to simply go along with the tide of shared indignation. She wanted to know whether there was indeed systematic, deliberate and direct discrimination against poor people, whether or not they had a migrant background. The book is more of a quest than an indictment, although there is certainly cause for concern and action. Naciri: 'Those who break the law and have a migrant background are significantly more likely to be remanded in custody. And those who have been remanded in custody are significantly more likely to be convicted and subsequently sentenced to prison. This is evident from extensive academic research. Subsequently, these same people have far fewer opportunities when they are released, because they lack the network to support them, because they cannot find work, have no home and no education. I hear, for example, that some Reuzengommers have plans to change their names, move elsewhere or find work through their own networks. That would help them to make a fresh start – and I wholeheartedly grant them that second chance. But who has access to



Biography

1991: Born in Mol (BE)

2012: Founded Amana vzw, a development aid organization active in Belgium and Morocco.

2014: Earned a Bachelor's in Business Management from Karel de Grote Hogeschool, Antwerp.

2014: Successfully lobbied for a legal status for student entrepreneurs in Belgium.

Since 2015, she is an independent entrepreneur, she became a prominent voice in public debates on poverty, education, youth, and entrepreneurship.

2015: Founded Fleks vzw, a youth organization in Antwerp promoting entrepreneurship. In 2020, following professionalisation and financial consolidation, the organisation was handed over to the young people.

Since 2016, she is a columnist for several newspaper: De Morgen, Gazet van Antwerpen, ...

2018: Completed a Master's in Multilingual Professional Communication at the University of Antwerp.

2018: Published: "Wij nemen het heft in handen", edited by Polis.

Since 2018 she is serving on boards of, among others, Netwerk tegen Armoede, Formaat Jeugdhuiswerk Vlaanderen, Ancienne Belgique, Taalunie, ...

2019: Won the Diwan Award for "Woman of the Year".

2019: Contributed to Zero Exclusion with the chapter "Diversiteit is geen doel, het is een resultaat".

2020-2022: Researcher at the University of Antwerp.

2023: Lecturer at Karel de Grote Hogeschool.

2024: Published "Klassenjustitie", edited by Pelckmans

2025: Joined the board of the Hannah Arendt Institute and Bednet vzw



such opportunities? What average citizen or vulnerable young person who comes into contact with the justice system has those opportunities?

Nevertheless, Yasmien Naciri refuses to answer “yes” to the question whether there is class justice in Belgium. Why? ‘Because there is too little research in Belgium to draw such a conclusion.’ But in the Netherlands, journalists from Investico set to work on court cases involving fifteen common offences, investigating whether the migration background and education of offenders had an impact on sentencing and punishment. To do so, they gained access to 1.2 million decisions by the Public Prosecution Service, more than 500,000 court rulings and 200,000 prison sentences imposed. Based on a thorough analysis of this mountain of material, the journalists concluded that low-educated people with a migrant background are almost three times more likely to end up in prison for the same offence than highly educated people without a migrant background. If that’s not class justice, then what is? ‘That’s right,’ Naciri responds. ‘After the publication of my book,

a large-scale survey was also conducted in France, with disturbing results. But in Belgium, we simply lack hard figures. We are hopelessly behind in terms of transparency and research. And when that research is done, it will show that there are many more gaps in the justice system than just class justice – although that remains an evil that must be combated wherever and whenever it occurs.’

Ensuring the rule of law

Yasmien Naciri stands up for human rights and the rule of law. In recent years, she has focused her critical attention primarily on the judiciary. Shouldn’t equal attention be paid to the other two pillars of the rule of law: the legislative and executive branches? Are elected representatives and ministers sufficiently scrutinised and screened? ‘Politicians deserve more criticism at the moment. They cut spending, but not on themselves. They complain about social fraud and slow justice, but keep their own mistakes out of the picture. They even cause a commotion about the abolition of alcohol during their own working hours.’ If that sounds harsh, she explains, it is mainly because she wants to keep herself on

track. All too often, she has believed in this or that politician, in their good intentions and honest commitment, only to be disappointed, especially when they become members of parliament or ministers.

Now that we are talking about the trias politica, Naciri also wants to say something about the so-called fourth estate – the media. She sees too much rushed work, too many copied press releases, too much framing based on leaks from the judiciary, and too little real investigative journalism. As a result, she notes, trust in the media is shrinking, which is a serious threat to democracy itself. Perhaps this is another field of work for her for the future? For now, she offers some good advice: ‘Start with a broader and more diverse composition of editorial teams. Take a look at which voices and areas of expertise are represented and which are absent from the editorial floor.’

The future has many perspectives

For 33-year-old Yasmien Naciri, the future is still wide open, especially for someone who has emerged as a professional jack-of-all-

trades. The first thing that comes to mind when I ask her about her plans for the future, is building a life with her partner. Not that she wants to trade her social commitment for a house, garden and children, but a little more space for personal and shared happiness does seem to be a priority. Although that plan is immediately followed by the ambition to be able to do even more to bridge the gap between justice and society, particularly to tackle the inequalities that exist there. And, yes, the path of journalism also seems attractive to explore.

'And furthermore,' she adds in the same breath, 'I want to do more for women in vulnerable positions. And by that I mean especially women who have been victims of abuse and sexual violence. Too little is being done in this area, and women with a migrant background have even less chance to be helped by the far too small safety nets. On the one hand, there is a white, paternalistic attitude that wants to save women of colour from their own culture – and that is counterproductive. But on the other hand, there is definitely a cultural problem in many communities, because women are expected

to uphold the honour of the family and to show *sabr* in domestic problems: patience, perseverance, or in other words, acceptance. This leads to many women seeing their lives pass them by in order to uphold the family

name. There is still a lot of work to be done in this area, especially for women who grew up in their country of origin and were then married off to boys who grew up here but dream of a dependent wife.'



© Archive Yasmien Naciri

But the future is not just about individuals either: How does she see our collective future? Doesn't her drive suffer from the cloud of doom hanging over 2025? 'No, on the contrary,' Yasmien Naciri is clear: 'Just when the situation seems to be getting worse, we need to speak out more clearly than ever: About war and genocide, but also about inequality and discrimination in our own society. Otherwise, it will be all too easy for the right wing to neglect justice, education, youth work and fairness in general.' And no, she does not feel that volunteer initiatives and outspoken opinions are futile. 'In 2025, our commitment is precisely what is needed to limit the damage that others are inflicting on our future. The EU has lost all credibility internationally in terms of human rights and international law due to its cowardly attitude towards Israel. The world order that was intended to ensure peace and mutual respect lies in tatters. Are we going to leave it at that? Or are we going to counter the current disorder with a clear moral compass? As far as I'm concerned, the choice is easy.'



LAUDATION

JAN NOLF



1951: Born in Torhout

Jan Nolf holds degrees in Law and Criminology from the University of Ghent.

1976–1987: Practiced as a lawyer in Bruges.

1987–2011: Served as Justice of the Peace in Roeselare

In mid-2011, he resigned in protest against the system that undermined local family justice. Since then, he has been active as a columnist for publications such as Knack, LeVif/L'Express, De Morgen, De Tijd, De Standaard, De Juristenkrant, and VRTDeRedactie.be. He also provides commentary in legal current affairs reports on VRT (e.g., Panorama episode "De Gestoorde Procedure") and RTBF (Devoir d'enquête).

2012: He published *Kwetsbaren in het recht* (The vulnerable in law), edited by UGA (now INNI Publisher) focusing on the topic of guardianship.

In 2016, he received the Citizenship Award. The P&V Foundation honoured him and investigative judge and fraud fighter Michel Claise for their commitment

to an open, democratic, tolerant, and solidarity-based society.

In 2016, he published *De kracht van rechtvaardigheid* (The power of justice) with EPO Publishers, which was translated into French the following year as *La force de la justice*.

In 2025, he released a critical analysis of the latest legislation from 2023 and 2024: *Voorzorgvolmacht en bewindvoering. Van principes naar praktijk* as part of the Notarial Practice Studies series by Wolters Kluwer.

He is active as #justitiwatcher (justice watcher) and #justitiefuisteraar (justice whisperer) on Twitter and on his personal blog. His recurring themes include local justice, poverty reduction, the Settlement Law (Afkoopwet), and the defense of the rule of law.

With this intergenerational tandem dream team, the Citizenship Award is about to enter its third decade. Colette and Yasmien connect an alert past with a vigilant future, reminiscent of the duos of 2008 with Sister Jeanne Devos and Simone Süsskind, and of 2014, with the late Reinilde Declair and Ho Chul Chantraine.

None of your predecessors' battles have been finished. All their commitments remain relevant. With 21 editions and 32 laureates since Fadéla Amara and Job Cohen in 2005, the Citizenship Award seems like an inventory of global problems, but also a rainbow of hope.

The Citizenship Award is a tribute, but not a gift. It is a task, a mission. No One Lives Forever: with each Citizenship Award, the political legacy of the predecessors is passed on, and with each new laureate, that commitment is broadened, deepened, and refreshed.

The engagement of Colette and Yasmien testifies to an authentic experience, the embodiment of a permanent struggle for truth and justice, and offers exemplary inspiration in

a fundamentally unstable world that seems to be ruled by populist potentates.

As Geert Mak – co-laureate in 2019 with Virginie Nguyen Hoang – points out in his latest book on Franklin Roosevelt's presidency: now, as then, not only major geopolitical interests are at stake, but a threat to the foundations of international law and the rule of law itself.

In his 1903 "Speech to the Young" Jean Jaurès referred to the Republic, which I dare to replace in this quotation with the concept of the rule of law: "The rule of law is a great act of trust and a great act of audacity." The key words remain trust and audacity. Jaurès' speech was a laudation to this "new, audacious and unprecedented work," which he contrasted with the oligarchy of the ancient republics of Greece and Rome, where a conquering aristocracy dominated the world.

Indeed, fundamentally different, the Republic, democracy, but above all the rule of law, protects a society where – still in Jaurès' words – "there are only citizens, and where all citizens are equal."

Today, however, the adulation of authoritarianism and elitism, a reactionary and nationalist nostalgia, is re-emerging.

Defending the rule of law and resisting creeping fascism requires a lifelong commitment to future generations. Journalists and opinion makers like yourselves are on the front lines, facing new assaults that my generation would hardly have thought possible.

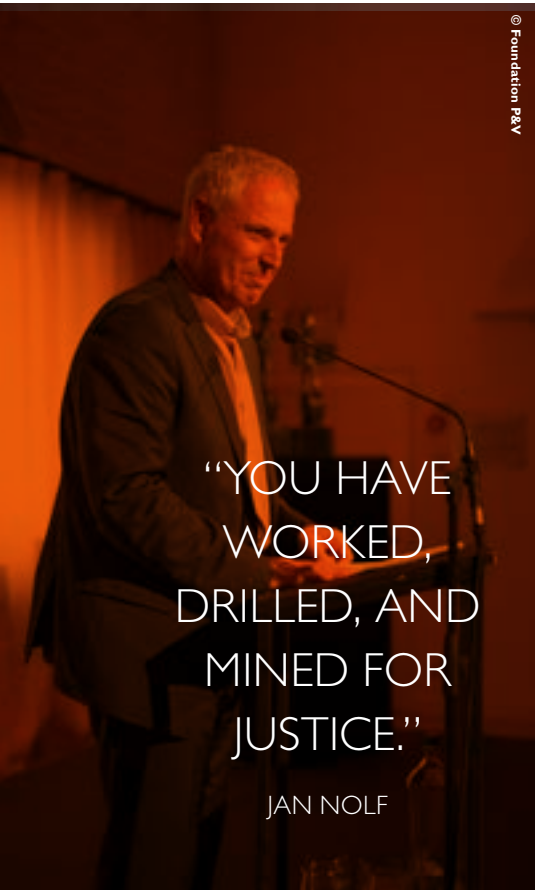
You are fighting a battle, not out of despair, but with more than courage. Audacity, Jaurès' keyword, is also the keyword for this Citizenship Award.

Nothing is acquired forever. But you already have a life of bold commitment. So you are inspired by Jaurès, who said: "The very audacity of the attempt contributes to success." This is what Camus called "the living revolt."

Dear Yasmien,

Scripta manent, even in an age of digital volatility.

You are holding your ground in the digital war of social media, and rightly so. No, we will



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not be bullied away by the trolls in their echo chambers of hate: When all the disgusted leave, only the disgusting remain.

As when you set a precedent in Belgium in 2018 by unmasking and convicting an internet troll. Your goal was not punishment, but to tear off the mask of his cowardly and grisly anonymity, and to open up the confrontation.

There is also a 'fighter' in you, you once said. Your courageous precedent helped pave the way for the historic trial against the far-right group Schild & Vrienden.

In that same year, 2018, you published a powerful first book with the bold title: 'We take the lead'. You described our society as one big challenge, in which every citizen is part of the solution. You wrote it for the new generation that is coming: young, diverse, educated, and empowered, and in need of a story that offers hope.

In an almost prophetic reference, you mentioned Adil El Arbi, who has since become your predecessor in the 2023 Citizenship

Award, but of course you couldn't have known that in 2018. What you did know was that you "share the same dreams" and oppose "symbolic annihilation," the filtering out of cultural minorities.

With this, the link to your latest book, 'Class Justice: How Blind is the Lady Justice', which begins with the Reuzegom trial, is immediately made, because Adil is now considering making a film about the death of Sanda Dia.

The Reuzegom trial – both in court and in the media – sparked mistrust in our legal system, the police, and, in your case, even "everything that comes close to power." "Mistrust is incredibly exhausting," you wrote, because "it goes against all my social commitment."

You sought out the blind spots of justice, the systemic errors, the holes in the blindfold of magistrates, the inequality in the quest for justice.

You did not offer any definitive solutions, but the justice system itself will never be able to provide better answers if the right questions are not first asked to the justice system itself.



You wrote much more than just a legal work, because you rightly consider class justice to be an extension of inequalities throughout society, a class-based society with class-based education, labor market, and healthcare, all with the same flaws and shortcomings.

Your book thus pays tribute to the legacy of Stéphane Hessel, our 2011 laureate: not only his call to "Time for Outrage!", but also and above all his resistance. No words without action.

You pointed out the barriers, the lack of defensibility from the beginning to the end of legal proceedings, from the secret language of a procedure to the 'colored prison', including the difference between white/blue color crime.

You also point to 'class journalism' in the Reuzegom case. Does 'selective empathy' also exist in the press, our fourth state power, as it does in the judiciary?

You defend the judiciary against aggressive populist attacks, but at the same time you ask it – in the words of laudator Bert Kruismans in 2016 – to 'look into its own heart'. The scandalous exam fraud at the High Council of Justice illustrates class justice par excellence: 'we know our own'. The interactive system of class justice that perpetuates class justice has rarely been illustrated in a more disconcerting way.

Your book was not well received by everyone. A lawyer-publicist argued that you were ill-placed to draw on your own experience with the justice system.

No, justice is not the property or monopoly of lawyers. Justice belongs to everyone. As your mother once told you, "The law is not just for lawyers, but also, and above all, for us." Which explains your ambition with your book: "to give the law back to the people."

Dear Yasmien,

Your grandfather came here to mine for the 'black gold' in Limburg for us. It wasn't his homeland, as in Benny Neyman's moving song, but he has given everything for it. In your own way – but also with every fiber of your being – you have worked, drilled, and mined for justice. On your journey, like him, you have trembled, sweated, sometimes cursed, and doubted.

You have tapped into a treasure trove of inspiration, the golden vein that irrigates our democracy: alert and vibrant citizenship.

Congratulations on this nomination, keep up the good work, and stay audacious!

THE LAUREATE

COLETTE BRAECKMAN

Interview by Gie Goris



It is difficult, especially in French-speaking Belgium, not to know Colette Braeckman. Her journalistic career began around 1964 as a student job for the youth page in *La Cité*. She made a name for herself at home and abroad as a roving reporter for *Le Soir* and as the author of a dozen books, mostly focussed on Central-Africa. And in 2025, she has lost none of her alertness and relevance. Colette Braeckman is more than a journalist; she has almost become an institution in her own right.

The jury of the Foundation P&V Citizenship Award notes that her long and ongoing journalistic career has always been dedicated to the people who are most forgotten, who suffer most from violence, and at the same time, the people with the greatest resilience. Colette Braeckman often did her work at the risk of her own life, without worrying about the wrath of the powerful. What matters to her is the search for truth and justice for those who suffer.

No place is as quiet as the city gardens of Uccle. No wood pigeons, no magpies, let alone a circling buzzard. There is no wind, no children playing anywhere, and the grass does not need mowing this summer. All you can hear are stories. About the dream of becoming a journalist, the horror of war and honesty as the norm. And now and then, if you listen carefully, the sound of chilled rosé being poured. For once, Colette Braeckman finds herself not in the midst of the turmoil of global power struggles; she is sitting under a parasol, at home.

The story of her journalistic dream also began at home, and that was even then Uccle, with a few visits from missionaries and the enchantment of the 1958 World's Fair. Even as a child, she had already conceived the idea that a job as a journalist would be the key that could open the door to a life of writing, storytelling and travelling. Her triple childhood dream. But as the child of a modest family, she knew she would never be able to afford those trips herself. For that, she would need an employer who would pay for tickets and expenses, and preferably also a salary at the end of the month.

‘REPORTERS ARE
WITNESSES.
BE HONEST
ABOUT THAT.’

COLETTE BRAECKMAN

Colette Braeckman's parents met in the Christian labour movement, where a deep humanism was professed and put into practice. 'They were simple office workers and followers of Cardijn,' says Braeckman. That commitment and deep human involvement in the lives of others laid an indestructible foundation for the life and work of their daughter Colette. From Cardijn's adage: see, judge and act, she took on the "seeing" part, in the broad sense of looking, listening and telling. Informing others is helping them to see, and when readers see what is happening, they are better equipped to judge and act. *A chaque'un son métier.*

A woman for all seasons

After secondary school, Colette Braeckman chose to study English, Spanish and German. She wanted to broaden her potential field of work beyond what French and Dutch – which she picked up in the parish and on the street, and for which she went on language-vacations in the Netherlands – made possible. She took her first steps in journalism as an 18-year-old student worker: The newspaper *La Cité* – the French-language counterpart of *Het Volk*, both published by the Christian labour movement



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asking the male editors to “astemblief” treat their new female colleague with respect. And that he didn’t want to hear any complaints... From being a jack-of-all-trades, Braeckman grew into a journalist who was always available and who was one of the first to do in-depth work on migration. What began with reports on the mining strikes in Limburg for *La Cité* grew into her first book by 1973: *Les étrangers en Belgique*. By then, Colette Braeckman had already made the switch to *Le Soir*; the newspaper with which she would remain associated for more than half a century.

At *Le Soir*, Colette Braeckman finally had the opportunity to work on the international desk, although she still had to contend with widespread prejudice against female journalists. After she was the first to report on the impact of prolonged drought in southern Niger; a male colleague was sent to cover the Belgian army’s humanitarian mission to Mali and Niger. The editor-in-chief patiently explained that he had made that decision out of concern for her virtue, to which she bluntly replied that her virginity was nobody’s business but her own. ‘It was my first and last feminist crisis,’ she says.

— had a youth page in the 1960s. To fill it, the journalist in charge needed eyes and ears to constantly come up with new ideas and stories. This was right up the alley of the young Colette Braeckman, who learned to deal with deadlines, limited space and the expectations of her bosses. And perhaps the most important lesson of those early years was that a woman could indeed earn a living as a journalist. Her

mother was not convinced of this, and Colette sometimes had to dot the i’s and cross the t’s in the newsroom, but now that she had entered her dream world through the narrowest of doors, no one could stop her:

When she was allowed to start working full-time at *La Cité* two years later, the then editor-in-chief gave a little speech to the editorial staff,

In any case, the message got through, because after that, no man stood in Colette Braeckman's way. The road to the world lay wide open.

Along that road she saw a lot of misery – that was already clear in Niger – but she would also occasionally find joy and redemption. 'I spent the best days of my life in Portugal, during the Carnation Revolution of 1974,' she says. Between brackets: for Colette Braeckman, the wall between life and work is as thin and

transparent as rice paper: Her life is her work, and her work can best be summarised by the term the French like to use: she is a grand reporter, a journalist who is on the ground where history is being made and who vividly reports on those turbulent events before the dust has settled.

Colette received a tip from the Portuguese migrant community in Brussels that "something was brewing" in their country of origin. 'That's

how journalism works,' she explains. 'The contacts from one story turn out to be the source of the next.' Thanks to those tips, she was in Portugal when history took a decisive turn. 'Experiencing the Carnation Revolution was so special because I became part of an omnipresent joy: the relief at the end of the dictatorship, the celebration of the uprising, the sudden prospect of a different world and a better life for all those people who had suffered under the dictatorship.' What made the revolution in Portugal even more remarkable was that it took place less than a year after the coup in Chile. 'Pinochet was the beginning of a long period of dictatorships in Latin America, while the coup and uprising in Portugal heralded the end of a period of dictatorships in Europe.' And to top it all off, Portugal was the gateway to Africa – because much of the discontent in the army had to do with the hopeless colonial wars in Angola, Mozambique, Cape Verde and Guinea-Bissau.

But Colette Braeckman's real goal, from her early childhood onwards, was Congo. Or, during the period when she started reporting abroad for Le Soir, Zaire. Of course, there was already



someone on the editorial staff who specialised in the former colony and who had excellent access to President Mobutu Sese Seko and his entourage. Colette took care of the (growing) opposition, which meant that she got to know the leading figures of the future at a very early stage: Laurent-Desiré Kabila and Etienne Tshisekedi. In this way, she also became a thorn in the side of the marshal for life – who at first respectfully accused her of annoying him, but in 1991 banned her from entering the territory.

A life in journalism is full of coincidences. Colette Braeckman repeats this several times. What she does not explicitly mention is that a setback only becomes an opportunity if you remain curious with full force and ambition. And keep writing. The closed border to Zaire sparked her interest in Rwanda. By the time the violence in that Central-African country erupted and the genocide began, she had thoroughly familiarised herself with the situation and was therefore able to report on those world-shaking events from the field – even though it was impossible to enter Kigali, 'because my name was on the Hutu militias lists', she says.

Surviving the violence

I pause the chronological narrative for a moment to ask a question that anyone would ask someone who has reported on a genocide at close quarters and who has been present at countless civil wars, uprisings and conflicts before and since: How do you survive all that violence, how do you process it? 'You function on two different time scales,' says Braeckman. 'First, there is the professional logic: you are there to report. That means your experiences have to be turned into an article, and that article has to reach the editors by the deadline. In the past, you had to find a telex, a telephone with an international connection or a fax machine. Today, you need Wi-Fi or a satellite connection. In short: there are so many practical things to arrange and keep track of that your head has no room for emotions or for wondering whether you can handle it all. You maintain that almost maniacal drive for as long as the mission lasts. It's only when I get home that the machine stops. It has often happened to me, especially after the Rwandan genocide, that I only started crying when I reread my own articles. It is at that moment that I look the real horror in the eye.'

Does that mean, I ask, that war journalists suspend their empathy in order to function? Braeckman hesitates. 'Of course, your empathy immediately goes out to the victims, not the perpetrators. But if you allow yourself to feel the full emotion on the spot, you can no longer write and report clear-eyed. And that's why you're there, isn't it?' That's the difference between a desk editor and a reporter; she explains. From Brussels, you can gather a lot of information about what's going on elsewhere in the world. You contact many sources, you read up thoroughly, you weigh everything up and you write your background analysis. 'But as a reporter, you are a witness. You are the eyes and ears of your readers; you are their chance to be present in the places and at the moments that matter.' The desk editor looks at reality with the gaze of Sirius, she says. This French expression refers to the star that, after the sun, is closest to the earth. In other words, from a great distance, you can oversee the whole reality and put everything in the right perspective. 'The reporter does not have that overview. They are standing with their feet in the mud, with impending violence and material concerns on their mind. They can

only tell what they see and experience. You have to be clear about those limitations.'

Journalism in the field should not get carried away by events, but it also cannot escape the immediate, the here and now. 'That's why honesty is the most important thing,' says Braeckman. 'You shouldn't claim to be telling the whole truth, because you can't see that from the field. You can't know everything, but you know much better than anyone else what is really happening.' And that includes the noise of war: The stench. The cries. And the whispers. 'The fact that unknown readers placed their trust in me also encouraged me to live up to their expectations. That means I did everything I could to make my story as close as possible to what I believed was real and true. It also meant that I had to question my own judgements, put my own preferences on the back burner and suspend my personal feelings.'

Taking a step back to think better

Her immersion in the events is temporary, and her testimony is bound by time and place. Does it ever happen that, with more distance and perhaps additional information, she had to adjust



her story?' 'Take Rwanda,' she replies. 'After three intense months of coming and going, writing and testifying, the genocide against the Tutsis ended. Instead of taking a holiday, I started writing again – but this time for a book, which not only included my notes and experiences, but also the colonial history and the broader context. Not that this was the last word, because the history of Rwanda and the region was not over. As new facts come to light, you have to re-examine your own assessment and adjust it where necessary. The way in which the RPF behaved in eastern Congo after its victory in Rwanda, for example, has fundamentally changed my view of the movement, the party and the government. I have seen how yesterday's liberators can become today's executioners. I have learned that Paul Kagame, who helped end the genocide, was also the man who sent his troops across the border and had Congolese people murdered.'

Another example is Mobutu. Since Colette Braeckman had been fascinated by Lumumba from an early age, as the personification of Congolese independence, she had negative preconceptions about the man who had ordered his arrest and elimination, Mobutu.



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'And over the years, he did indeed increasingly reveal himself to be a power-hungry, violent and corrupt dictator. But I now also see that he played a crucial role in the unity of this enormous country. His discourse on Zaire – which he based on Lumumba's ideas – has helped to ensure that Congo is still one nation today and that the Congolese identify with it as Congolese citizens with a Congolese nationality. Moreover, his discourse on authenticity was an early attempt at mental decolonisation. A half-hearted attempt, an opportunistic attempt, but still a way to shake off the weight of the colonial period. Part of that colonial legacy, says Colette Braeckman, is corruption: 'It were the Belgians who taught the Congolese that there is easy money to be made in politics. That was the lesson of 1960-1961: those who serve our interests are made rich, the others are buried. Belgium bought its Congolese accomplices. And that corruption has become a system that continues to undermine the opportunities of Congo and the Congolese to this day.'

A book is a small rebellion

How do you convey such historical and invisible interests as a travelling reporter? She hesitates.

'You need a book for that,' she says. 'A book is a completely different universe from a newspaper article. With the latter; you reach a much larger audience, but the former allows you to explore a subject in depth and breadth'. And, she adds, 'ever since my first book on migration, I realised that books gave me a credibility that opened many new doors for me.' At various points during the conversation and throughout her career, new book projects keep popping up. That's no coincidence, it's a necessity. 'Sometimes, as a journalist, you have to rebel against the limitations of the medium,' she says with the passion of a twenty-five-year-old. 'In a newspaper; a two-page report is quite something; in a magazine, you have to be grateful if six pages are made available for your penetrating story. But not all reality fits within those tight spaces. And the journalist's own involvement sometimes needs more freedom and space too.'

With *Le Dinosaur ou le Zaïre de Mobutu* from 1992, she answered the marshal when he declared her persona non grata. A quarter of a century later she published *Congo. Aller retour*; in which she mainly gives a voice to the Congolese and their resilience and vitality. In between she

wrote *Terreur Africaine, Burundi, Rwanda, Zaïre, Les racines de la violence* (1996), *Les nouveaux prédateurs, Politique des puissances en Afrique centrale* (2003), *Vers la deuxième indépendance du Congo* (2009) and *L'homme qui répare les femmes, Le combat du Docteur Mukwege* (2013). 'For some realities, you not only need more space to tell the story, but also a central character: Doctor Mukwege was such a character; allowing her to tell the story of the horrors of the complex violence in eastern Congo, along with the enormous efforts of the Congolese people to defend their own humanity and protect the integrity of their fellow citizens. To write that book, Braeckman spent a few weeks with Dr Mukwege, conducting long interviews every day in between his surgery and consultations. 'To tell a personal story with all its relevance and consequences, you need time.' Time. It was on my list of questions for Colette Braeckman: isn't time one of the least recognised but most important requirements for good journalism? She nods. 'The difference with money – also an important condition for doing your job well – is that you can sometimes make time yourself. You can take leave, you can take a break from your career and apply for a grant...



'Unfathomable silence

On page 267 of her journalistic memoirs, *Mes carnets noirs*, Colette Braeckman finds herself in the midst of the genocide in Rwanda. 'I have often wondered,' she writes in a reflection on those days, 'whether the genocide could have happened in the same way in our current world with its ubiquitous mobile phones, social networks and images circulating on the internet? In this world, everyone would have immediately seen and known what was going on. No one could have claimed they didn't know...' Would the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs still have been able to decide to withdraw the blue helmets? Would the United States still have been able to abstain from voting on the term genocide at the UN? Colette Braeckman asks these questions at the beginning of 2023. Mid 2025, the answers are known.

We are talking about the horror of geopolitical conflicts for civilians and bystanders, and that conversation cannot ignore the loud cry for humanity from Gaza. Brussels and Washington respond to the question of whether genocide can still take place unchallenged in the age of live streaming with averted eyes, complicity

and inhumanity. 'Gaza is what concerns and outrages me most today. A people is being massacred and driven out, and Palestinian journalists are being murdered one by one. And what are Belgian governments doing? Nothing. I am literally revolted by so much cowardice.' She finds it incomprehensible that Israel can commit genocide with the support of Western countries and deny foreign journalists access to the region. And she fears that this approach will set a precedent. 'Today, entire continents have already disappeared from our newspapers, magazines and news broadcasts. Sudan, Somalia, Ethiopia: any idea what's going on there? Latin America? Southeast Asia, anyone?'

For those who might still have doubts: the indignation that made Colette Braeckman look up to Lumumba and Che Guevara as a teenager has not disappeared. Today, it takes the form of sympathy for those who suffer rather than fascination with leaders. 'The daily anger about what is happening in Gaza is my nature,' she says. And then: 'Anyway, that's an injustice you have to stand up against, right? You can't read that farewell letter from Al Jazeera journalist Anas al-Sharif with dry eyes, can you?'

"If these words reach you, you know that Israel has succeeded in killing me and silencing me." Terrible, isn't it?' No wonder Colette Braeckman was present at the Mont des Arts-protest end of August, where journalist-associations protested again the targeted elimination of journalists by Israel. She read out five of the more than two hundred names of murdered journalists. 'It literally brought tears to my eyes', she says.

Real journalism remains necessary

Who am I writing for, Braeckman asks herself at the very end of her memoirs. I have selected one of the answers, because I believe it characterises her better than any of the other possibilities: 'Perhaps I am also writing for the victims. To ensure that their sacrifice serves a purpose, that their suffering was not in vain, that their deaths do not remain completely anonymous, in the hope that my story will restore a little dignity to them.' At the same time, Braeckman emphasises that as a journalist, you cannot be driven solely by indignation. That would turn you into an activist, and that is a different role. She therefore finds it normal that journalists at *Le Soir* are not allowed to sign petitions, let alone pursue or hold political office. Perhaps because she is

free from those restrictions now that she is fully retired, but still.

'The secret to a long life is to keep moving, keep writing, keep telling stories,' she says, as the last drops of rosé wine are divided between two glasses. 'A journalist is never satisfied with what is shown. You don't find relevant issues by chance; you have to go out and look for them. To do that, you need a lot of contacts and preliminary conversations, sufficient knowledge of the subject matter so that you are trusted and respected by people who know what is going on or what is coming. With their tips and signals, you can get started in time and gain deeper insight.' On the other hand, she believes there must also be trust in the journalist's word. 'Nowadays, it seems as if something is only true if a university professor says so. Even if a journalist observes something in the field, or has been working on the subject for thirty years, a PhD holder still has to be brought in to validate every observation. That really gets on my nerves.' Perhaps, I suggest, this is the consequence of the disappearance of journalists who can specialise in a theme or region for years. Braeckman acknowledges that

too, of course. 'And that's a shame, because it's specialisation that allows you, as a reporter, to see and provide context.'

We conclude with a look to the future. Will the time-consuming and often gruelling work of journalists soon be taken over by the much cheaper use of artificial intelligence, I ask Colette



Braeckman is not so pessimistic: 'The personal perspective and interpretation of journalists cannot be replaced by ChatGPT or other AI platforms. They can give you a quick overview of facts, but not an experience, not credibility. Those are human extras.'

Perhaps, I suggest, the era of the grand reporter; the Western correspondent who reports on the world, is gradually coming to an end. After all, there are countless Congolese, Indian or Palestinian journalists who know their reality better than we do, and who can therefore describe it more vividly than we ever could. 'More space and recognition for these journalists is certainly the order of the day, but we must not forget the importance of the connection with the reader: A journalist in Kinshasa or Goma knows the many sides of developments there, but often has little awareness of what the readers of a Belgian newspaper already know or only know, how to address them, what interests them. A reporter who is part of her target audience has the added value of being a bridge between the reality far away and the reader's world. Journalism will always be a collaborative effort that transcends borders.'

Books published

1971: Les étrangers en Belgique, Editions Vie Ouvrière

1975: Portugal révolution surveillée, Rossel

1992: Le Dinosaur, ou le Zaïre de Mobutu, Editions Fayard

1994: Rwanda, histoire d'un génocide, Editions Fayard

1996: Terreur africaine, Editions Fayard

1998: L'enjeu congolais, Editions Fayard

2000: Les nouveaux prédateurs, Editions Fayard

2002: Lumumba, un crime d'état, Editions Aden

2013: L'homme qui répare les femmes, GRIP éditions

2015: Joined the members of the jury for Milo Rau's project 'The Congo Tribunal' (Bukavu/Berlin Hearings)

2016: Co-author of the film realised by Thierry Michel, L'homme qui répare les femmes

2023: Mes Carnets Noirs, a compelling autobiographical work published by Weyrich Éditions.

Biography

1946: Born in Brussels

1964-1965: Studied at a school for interpreters, with the idea to broaden her field of work in a possible career in journalism.

1965-1967: Diploma for secondary teacher (French and history)

1966: Contributed to the youth section of the newspaper La Cité.

1968: Professional full-time journalist at La Cité, reporting on social and women issues

1970: Hired by the weekly Special, covering international issues like interviewing Salvador Allende in Chile

1971: Joined Le Soir, covering social issues and after a year also international issues (such as Carnation revolution in Portugal, drought in Sahel countries, liberation war and independence of Angola, end of the Khmer Rouge regime in Cambodia...)

From 1974 to 1985, she served as the Brussels correspondent for the Journal de Genève

Since 1980 : Contributor at Le Monde Diplomatique

1980: Senior reporter in the international section of Le Soir, covering major global events

1983: Co-founder and first president of the “Société des journalistes professionnels du Soir” (Association of Professional Journalists of Le Soir)

1986: awarded of a Fullbright fellowship for one year at Stanford University

1990–2000: specialized in the Great Lakes region of Africa and the Rwandan genocide, covered the end of the apartheid regime in South Africa, the end Mobutu's era in Congo, the wars in Congo, the murder of Laurent Désiré Kabila.

2016: Doctor Honoris Causa, University of Liège

2020: Briefly joined a working group on decolonization commissioned by the Brussels Capital Region

2020: Doctor Honoris Causa, Université Catholique de Bukavu (UCB)

2010-2020 Member of the selection committee of The King Baudouin Prize for development

LAUDATION

YVON LAMMENS



'FRATERNITY
IS YOUR
STRENGTH,
EQUALITY
YOUR FIGHT,
AND FREEDOM
YOUR FAITH'

YVON LAMMENS





© Archive Yvon Lammens

When the P&V Foundation asked me to pay tribute to Colette Braeckman in just 10 minutes, I thought it was impossible given the richness of her journey. I chose to portray her through the eyes of a filmmaker and friend, highlighting her role with young people, her commitment to human rights, her pursuit of truth, and the importance of advocacy and fieldwork.

She began very young, at 18, writing for *La Cité* about “Belgian youth.” I’ve always been impressed by her connection with young people – children, teenagers, and young adults alike. They were all drawn to Colette.

WBI (Wallonie Bruxelles International) invited us to Kinshasa for a week to present our films. Colette spent her afternoons teaching and exchanging ideas with journalism and communication students. In the evenings, we screened documentaries followed by public

discussions. Colette always had a magnetic presence. The conversations were open, and she never held back. When criticism or denunciation was needed, she didn’t hesitate – something that caused tension with certain presidents.

Her writings inspire young people to engage with international issues, complex geopolitical relations, and human rights. Her clear and well-documented style is a model of ethical and committed journalism, encouraging new generations to develop critical thinking.

We followed the story of a gold mine in Kamituga, DRC, for over 20 years. The local population was always informed of our arrival. Colette would listen to the Congolese people’s grievances for hours with empathy, putting herself in their shoes. There were mothers who had been raped – exhausted but relieved to finally speak out.

Her work goes beyond simply reporting events. She gives a voice to victims of conflict, marginalized communities, and local actors of social and political change.

Many young people complained about corruption and the lack of schools. Colette has always been sensitive to education and never hesitated to write about the shortage of schools in Africa, the illusion of free education, and the preference given to boys over girls.

Skin color doesn't matter to her; she thrives on differences. Unlike many journalists who report from their hotel rooms, Colette goes into the field.

Devoted to the Théâtre de Poche, she serves as a board member and participated in the film *L'ÎLE*, based on a play inspired by *Antigone*, featuring Congolese and Rwandan actors. She loved engaging with young performers in the DRC, Burundi, and Kigali, and would eagerly discuss the political content of the play after performances.

She shares her experience by addressing crucial topics to raise awareness among young people about often overlooked realities. She speaks about media responsibility and the importance of sharing verified and nuanced information.

Deeply involved in NGOs, especially with BVES and its director Murhabazi Nemegebe, who has worked for over 15 years to free child soldiers used in combat or sexually exploited. Colette wrote many articles on this, going on-site to witness the recovery of children from armed groups and to denounce the silence of MONUC, revealing truths others preferred to ignore.

She is also active with Amnesty International and its former director Philippe Hesmans, defending human rights and participating in numerous debates, always carrying the voice of the oppressed with unwavering conviction. She shows that journalism can be a tool for understanding the world, but also an act of courage and responsibility.

Every year, she spends her holidays in Peyresq, France, where she is invited to lead writing workshops, always amazed by the commitment and passion of the young participants.

Colette Braeckman is more than a journalist: she is a witness to contemporary history, a voice that illuminates the shadows, and an inspiration for future generations of journalists. Her writings on the Rwandan genocide shed light on aspects often overlooked by Western media.

What sets her apart is her ability to combine journalistic rigor with ethical commitment. This is what led her to write for numerous international newspapers and author many books.

To me, Colette Braeckman is : Fraternity is her strength, equality her fight, and freedom her faith.

Yvon Lammens a Belgian filmmaker born in 1951 in Kikwit, Congo is known for his patient, immersive approach, often spending years on a single subject to build trust and depth. His work is praised for being documented, sensitive, and thought-provoking.

1981: «Loin très loin.» : Documentary about the support provided by MSF and Handicap International to children who have been mutilated by anti-personnel mines in Cambodia.

2000: «Un Médecin à Tinzaouaten» (Mali) : Documents a doctor's efforts to provide healthcare and education to young Tuaregs on the Mali-Algeria border:

«MDM Belgique» : Covers medical consultations for homeless people and refugees in Brussels.

2002: «Je lis dans ma commune» : Promotes reading among youth through interviews with Belgian intellectuals and artists.

2009: Amnesty International : «Citoyens du monde»: Five groups of young people set out to meet human rights defenders around the world.

2014: «L'ILE»: The film tells the story of the tour in the DRC, Rwanda, and Burundi of the play "L'Ile", an adaptation of the Antigone myth performed by two actors from Congo and Rwanda.

2015: «L'Or Noyé de Kamituga» : Revisits the mining town of Kamituga with Colette Braeckman, exploring its decline and the struggles of gold diggers.

2024: «Sortir du Chaos» cinematic portrait of the artist Tapta (Maria Wierusz Kowalski), a prominent figure in Belgian-Polish contemporary art.



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THE ARTIST | PHILIP AGUIRRE Y OTEGUI

Internationally renowned sculptor Philip Aguirre y Otegui (1961) lives and works in Antwerp. He studied at the Antwerp Academy of Fine Arts. He has been strongly influenced by many trips and stays, first in Rome, Florence and Spain, and later on in Latin America and Africa. A number of his pieces are part of important collections, and many are on display in public spaces. He regularly participates in individual or group exhibitions both in Belgium and abroad. On 17 March 2017, he received the International Award for Public Art for this work in Hong Kong. From October 2022 until the end of January 2023, his work was shown in the Plantin-Moretusmuseum in Antwerp: "L'invitation au voyage". A selection of his drawings and graphic works is presented in a book published on the occasion of this exposition. In 2025, at Valerie_Traan Gallery in Antwerp, Philip Aguirre exhibited a series of monumental sculptures in dialogue with some of his older works which have never been on display.

<http://www.philipaguirre.be/>

Philip Aguirre has stood out from the artistic and conceptual flows of his time since the early 1980s. He is interested in classical art, cubists and modernists, as well as other cultures - African art, in particular. In his own words, his work contains: 'References to cubism, Greek art or a baroque sculpture - these can all be seen in my work, but I try to absorb them into a personal style. To my mind, beauty is neither good nor lovely. True beauty also depicts the cruelty of life. This is why I strive for a kind of poetry - one that isn't abstract, but rather tries to make elements of our world readable.'

Versatile artist Aguirre has built up a rich body of work in various art disciplines over the past 40 years. He is best known for his sculptures, installations and monumental works in public spaces. His extensive oeuvre of drawings and graphic works is much less known. The focus on drawing forms the start of his thought process but techniques such as etchings and





© Diego Franssens



© Philip Aguirre y Otegui

water shortages, migration, social injustice, and poverty. He is guided by images of the world today, people in situations of violence, people fleeing, and protests, among other things, as well as by concrete issues such as the Israeli-Palestine conflict, or young migrants risking the journey to Europe in a rickety boat, seeking a better life.

While Philip Aguirre's art is consistent and personal, it is also evolving on an ongoing basis and is always particularly engaged and humanistic in nature.

woodcuts also often feature in his work. Human figures and landscapes are his main source of inspiration. 'My images abstract personal traits, and link social issues to the universal concept of humanity.'

His focus is on the world, and his works radiate with a certain kind of thoughtfulness: they are powerful and poetic at the same time. He is sensitive to societal issues such as



Exile

Yasmien Naciri and Colette Braeckman will receive a woodcut, printed on Japanese paper, created in 2017, called "Exile". 'It is an excerpt from a stream of refugees based on newspaper photographs of the Rwandan Genocide in 1994. Miles of people streaming through the jungle, packed with mattresses, pots and pans, clothing.... I rendered these as silhouettes.' The work is featured in his book "L'invitation au voyage" (Mercatorfonds, 2022)

This text is based on Philip Aguirre y Otegui (2008) – "Sculptures, 1985–2007", Mercatorfonds, as well as texts by the artist himself.

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