



# CITIZENSHIP AWARD CEREMONY OF THE P&V FOUNDATION 2024



**FOUNDATION P&V**

*emancipation participation  
citizenship solidarity*



© archive Sebbe Nobels



© Foundation P&V

# CONTENT

The Citizenship Award 2024.....p1

The P&V Foundation..... p4

The laureate: **Maité Meeûs**..... p20

The laudation: **Sofie Peeters** ..... p30

The laureate: **Sebbe Nobels** ..... p34

The laudation: **Sandip Patel**..... p46

The members of the jury ..... p36

The artist: **Philip Aguirre y Otegui** ..... p38

# THE CITIZENSHIP AWARD

# 2024



◀ Olivier Servais

Jessy Siongers ▶



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

**Olivier Servais** is a professor of anthropology and 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 Free University of Brussels (VUB) and Ghent University. She coordinates the interuniversity Centre for Culture Research and is one of the supervisors of the *Youth Research Platform*. She also teaches *Cultural Management* at the VUB.

She contributed 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.

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 20th 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 18 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 June to select the laureates for 2024 out of this shortlist (jury).

The jury chose to reward two Belgians who work for greater social justice by giving a voice to the less visible. Their joint actions contribute to promoting a more inclusive and equitable society: **Maité Meeûs**, feminist activist and founder of the impactful movement #BalanceTonBar; and **Seppé Nobels**, chef and social entrepreneur who combines culinary excellence with social commitment.

## MAÏTÉ MEEÛS

Maïté Meeûs is a Belgian militant feminist. She is the founder of the Instagram account *Balance ton Bar*, which anonymously collects and publishes testimonies from victims of sexual violence in bars and nightlife venues, and the organisation *Artémise*, with as mission to provide a place where victims can talk, rebuild their lives, and express themselves in free discussion groups led by professionals.

Sexual violence is an underestimated issue, particularly among young people. The *Balance ton Bar*-movement and *Artémise* have not only given survivors a powerful voice but have also brought about tangible change, with a special focus on socially vulnerable women. By using social media to address injustice and support survivors, Maïté Meeûs has become a role model and source of inspiration for young people. Her dedication, courage, and commitment to social change makes her a truly deserving laureate of this award, which highlights active citizenship and solidarity.

## SEPPE NOBELS

Seppe Nobels is a Belgian chef and entrepreneur serving as an inspiring example of how culinary talent can contribute to social change and inclusivity. In 2021, Seppe Nobels started the socio-culinary project *Instroom* in Antwerp, a hybrid between a training centre and an experiential restaurant, where he surprised guests with dishes from the home countries of refugees and asylum seekers. In January 2024, he launched a similar temporary project in 't *Oud Gasthuis* in Mechelen.

By empowering vulnerable groups such as newcomers, refugees, and people with young-onset dementia through training and culinary arts, Seppe Nobels fosters dialogue, connection, and a positive narrative around inclusivity. His work has a profound impact on both the people directly involved and the wider community, making him an inspiring role model for young people. As a bridge-builder between generations and cultures, he embodies our shared values of solidarity, empowerment, citizenship, and participation.

## CROSSED PERSPECTIVES

As Gie Goris writes: "There are many points on which the two laureates of this 20th Citizenship Award differ, such as language and the issues they take up, or field of work and the generation they belong to. But on a few essential points, they are actually very close. The importance of passion, for example. Finding your own strengths and going full steam ahead - even if your small circle or the wider world thinks you're crazy. If you don't take risks, you cannot make a difference, seems





to be a life motto for both Maïté Meeûs and Seppe Nobels. In addition, both are strong – or even headstrong - individuals who are very well aware that alone they are nothing. Collaborators, grassroots activists, a large group of supporters: it is thanks to them that a stubborn choice can grow into a social movement or unlock social change. And so, argue both winners of the P&V Foundation Citizenship Award 2024, listening to the stories of others is perhaps the most important contribution they make. Stories of loss and violence, of resistance and hope. And then translating those stories into action. Into protest, empowerment, care and opportunity. That is citizenship, anno 2024!"

Maïté Meeûs and Seppe Nobels were given the opportunity to support a project that is in line with the mission and values of our foundation. Maïté Meeûs chose the Brussels-based organisation *Artémise*. The organization is dedicated to providing comprehensive and compassionate support to survivors of sexual violence. *Artémise* focuses on creating a safe space where victims can share their experiences and rebuild with dignity and fairness. The organization offers support groups and individual follow-ups led by qualified

professionals, aiming to help survivors overcome trauma-related challenges. *Artémise* works closely with partners to provide comprehensive and tailored support to each individual.

Seppe chose UnitedWe, founded together with Charuwan Pauwels and Nico Dockx, which supports individuals from various target groups in a training academy, retraining them as chefs, sous-chefs, or service staff. This includes young school dropouts, asylum seekers, non-native newcomers, and inactive job seekers. These are individuals in socially vulnerable situations: a group of citizens for whom opportunities to fully participate in society are limited. This organisation addresses two needs: The first is human, as the dishes the trainees prepare are often the only memories of their roots they still possess. These are often literally recipes or culinary techniques they learned from their (grand)parents. However, due to war, persecution, or famine, they can no longer return to their home country. The second need UnitedWe addresses is purely economic. The hospitality sector in Belgium suffers from a shortage of good professionals. Fulfilling the culinary dreams of the target

groups also helps solve a sectoral shortage. The non-profit helps non-native newcomers and refugees integrate into hospitality jobs.

Sofie Peeters, storyteller, journalist and filmmaker, and Sandip Patel, restaurant manager of *'t Gasthuis*, will pronounce the laureates' laudations.

Besides the financial support, the laureates will receive a woodcut on paper from the artist 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 has just celebrated its 25th anniversary of working with young people and aims to further enhance its approach by involving youth at all levels of its projects.



**FOUNDATION P&V**

*emancipation participation  
citizenship solidarity*





## A FOUNDATION DEDICATED TO EMPOWERING YOUTH!

The cornerstone of the P&V Foundation is the fight against the exclusion of young people. The Foundation wants to guide young people regarding different aspects of social life. By giving them the necessary opportunities and by actively involving them, it helps them take their lives into their own hands. This year, the Foundation has placed young people at the center of its projects, involving them at all levels of decision-making. This is ahead of the new call for projects 'Feeling Youth' and also includes a new pilot project with the P&V Group Academy, and the Wajow Masterclass.

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.



## P&V GROUP ACADEMY

In 2024, the P&V Foundation and the P&V Group launched 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. On April 22, 2024, 7 youngsters started their paid internship as part of the P&V Group Academy!

This pilot project of the P&V Group Academy was made possible thanks to the network of partner non-profits whose primary mission is to guide young people towards the job market, such as Capital, City Pirates, Déclic, Profo, 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 and have a look at our film or dive into the website published for the occasion!



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

Every three years, the P&V Foundation launches multi-year projects based on rigorous scientific research and attentive listening to young people. Our project, Feeling You(th), focuses on the increasingly urgent issue of youth mental health.

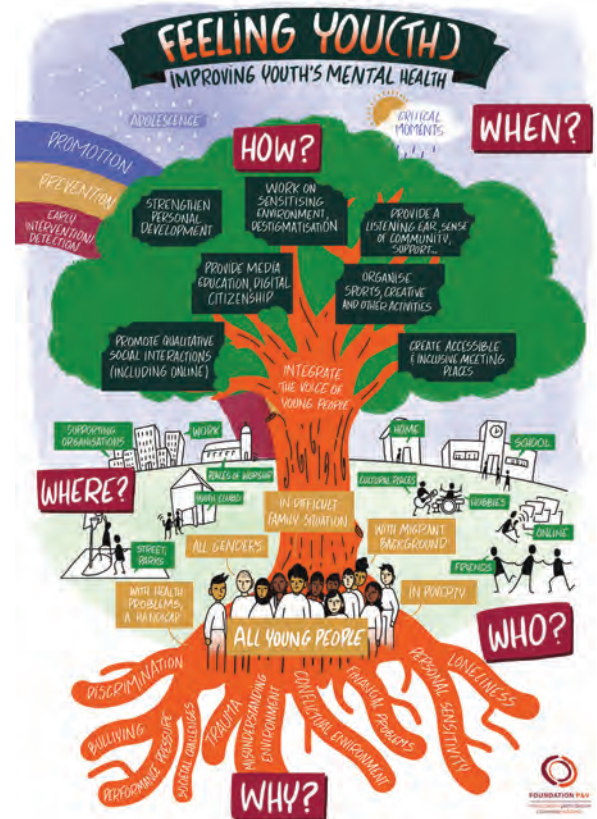
In 2024, the P&V Foundation launched a series of initiatives to improve the mental health of young people in Belgium. During a Reflection Day in March, researchers shared key findings with over 50 young participants, sparking discussions on effective interventions and unmet needs. These insights shaped our call for projects, open from June to September, aimed at addressing youth mental health.

In September, the Foundation hosted the “Mental State of the Youth” event, uniting researchers, young people, and



practitioners to discuss challenges and inspire action. By the month's end, 98 project proposals were submitted and evaluated by a diverse panel of youngsters, researchers and P&V Foundation's team. Ultimately, 16 winning projects were selected to receive financial and non-financial support in 2025.

More information? Scan this QR code





## GUEST LECTURES: ACADEMIC PARTNERSHIPS ULB/VUB

As every year, the P&V Foundation participated in the #weKONEKT.brussels week. From March 25 to 29, the Vrije Universiteit Brussel (VUB) and the Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB) organized the weKONEKT.Brussels week. Through more than 100 activities spread across the city of Brussels, both Urban Engaged Universities aim to bring together more than 6,000 students, academics, and Brussels residents around knowledge, science, and culture.

This year, the P&V Group and the P&V Foundation hosted three Masterclasses. Within the framework of Sociology of Work and Employment, Christophe Vanroelen invited researchers of the European Trade Union Institute (ETUI), for an eye-opening guest lecture titled "Democratizing the workplace in times of AI and platform economy."

Julie Bertone invited Jérôme Vermer for a guest lecture for her students from the Multilingual Bachelor program. He is the author of the best-selling "Philocomix" series and "Libres de

penser.” His work builds bridges between the academic world and the general public and aims to make philosophy accessible to as many people as possible.

Finally, Esmeralda Uka from WAJOW Talent Factory, an organization founded by Citizenship Award 2023 laureate Adil El Arbi, presented the work of Wajow, an inclusive and free 9-month program for young people passionate about filmmaking and online content creation, to more than 50 youngsters from the Medialab VUB with Willem Joris, ULB, and organizations from the P&V Foundation’s network.



## 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 Decler, 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 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.

## THE PRIZE WINNERS 2024



2023



# THE LAUREATE

# MAÏTÉ MEEÛS

Interview by Gie Goris

*Maïté Meeûs describes herself as a soft-spoken person with a mission, but is known in Brussels and French-speaking Belgium as the militant feminist who launched the Instagram account #balance\_ton\_bar (BtB). With it, she collects and publishes testimonies of survivors of sexual violence in bars and entertainment venues - initially in Ixelles and Brussels, but soon no fewer than 55 BtB pages were created in various countries. Alarm about such gender violence was also raised lately in Ghent and Kortrijk. In 2024, Meeûs launched her own non-profit organisation, Artémise, 'to provide a place where survivors can talk, rebuild their lives and express themselves under professional guidance.' Her feminist commitment was awarded the Amnesty Jeunes des Droits Humains prize in April 2022, at the end of 2024 she got on the list of Forbes Belgium 30Under30. And now she also receives the Foundation P&V Citizenship Award.*

'Everything relating to girls' and women's rights, and certainly gender violence, touched me from a very young age,' says Maïté Meeûs. 'It was all very close to my skin. It was very personal and lived through, but that's not what I want to talk about. The fight for a safe city and against gender-based violence is much more important.' It immediately typifies Meeûs: she avoids the spotlight when it is directed at her and she uses that attention to highlight the cause she fights for. Still, we walked back in time for a moment to better understand the young woman behind BalanceTonBar:

Maïté Meeûs was born in Uccle to a Belgian mother and an Indian father. As a five-year-old child, she lived for a year in the Indian city of Kolkata, where her mother did volunteer work. But otherwise she grew up in Brussels with her mother and grandparents, although that sounds more traditional than it was: 'My mother did not like conventions and took me with her



everywhere she went, until I was six. I come from a decidedly socially engaged background, even though my mother might not have described herself as a feminist'

Young Maïté - 'too shy to say more than two sentences in class' - did develop her feminist beliefs very early. Meeûs: 'A key moment was when, as a 13- or 14-year-old, I saw Sofie Peeters' documentary *Femme de la rue*. The images and the denunciation resonated very strongly with my own experience. It was in the years when I started to look more womanly and, as a result, was also confronted with men who catcalled me in the streets, men who touched me or grabbed me, men who started to address me very differently... At first, I questioned myself: was I behaving 'incorrectly'? Was I wearing inappropriate outfits? Was I in the wrong

places, at the wrong times? When I was newly confronted with it, it wasn't really a subject we easily talked about with peers either. That is very different for young girls today, after #MeToo.'

'We would spontaneously blame ourselves for getting the wrong kind of attention. Even after really unpleasant experiences, we remained largely blind to the structural and systemic causes of the violence coming at us. Only gradually it dawned on me that those individual questions needed structural answers, focused on the system that created inequality and thereby caused violence. You cannot solve the fear that girls feel on the streets - and often even in their own living rooms or bedrooms - by telling them to be cautious. Because, as long as the system and structure are not addressed, the threat always resurfaces anyway. These are insights that gradually emerged, just as my indignation about them also grew bit by bit. Around the age of eighteen, I already saw fairly clearly what was going on and how unacceptable it all was.'

Yet after her secondary education at Saint Hubert College in Boitsfort, Meeûs did not choose a tertiary education in social sciences,

“I REFUSE TO LIVE IN  
A WORLD WHERE  
WOMEN HAVE TO  
“BE CAREFUL” WHILE  
PERPETRATORS  
OF VIOLENCE  
CONTINUE TO  
GO FREE”

M M  
MAÏTÉ MEEÛS

but rather economics at the prestigious Bocconi University in Milan, Italy. I had worked extremely hard to excel in the admission tests. That university was actually too expensive for my mother and we could only pay the tuition fee with a scholarship, but I chose to study economics because I believed it would provide me with a framework to better understand the world around me and the challenges we face together. That was a bit naïve, and very soon I found out that I did not quite fit in the institution. The curriculum certainly didn't give me the tools I was looking for to change the system, and most students at such an elite business school are upper class. I felt like I was trapped in a machine doing social reproduction, whereas I wanted social change. And besides, the future prospects - consultant at KPMG or an executive position at BNP - were anything but motivating for me. I lasted two years and then took a break year - knowing full well that I would not return to Milan after that. That year I travelled a lot, especially in the Middle East. Meanwhile, I did a job here, and a job there. Then in Brussels I picked up the Cours Florent, a drama course. I had been training in drama arts for 12 years, so it felt like diving into an art that really mattered to me.

**And then, at the end of 2021, a very different Maité Meeûs suddenly appears. The private girl wary of speaking in public becomes a young woman who calls a spade a spade, and launches a political action against gender violence in Brussels' nightlife. What had happened?**

Maité Meeûs: 'BalanceTonBar was a bursting. There was an accumulation of stories about drugging and sexual abuse in a number of

bars in Ixelles. On top of that, the media kept approaching those stories as individual cases caused by some dangerous madman. In my own circle of friends and acquaintances, at least 10 women had been victims of chemical submission or sexual violence. So many women reported sexual assault or rape, but there was hardly any follow-up. As a woman, your chances of being further humiliated at the police station are higher than those of seeing justice served and the perpetrator punished. I didn't have the words or resources for it, but felt: this has to stop.



These crimes must be taken seriously because these traumas destroy lives.'

'I was outraged, but also powerless. Because who was I? Not a politician, not a lawyer; not an opinion maker. I only had a computer and an Instagram account. I used that to launch an appeal for testimonies, promising to publish them - anonymously. What to me was something of a cry of despair turned out to resonate throughout the city. One testimony after another flooded in. Then the media started calling for more explanations. And then came the questions from politicians who wanted to get involved. I had clearly opened Pandora's box. I tried not to become the face of a movement, but I did feel that stepping out the shadows and anonymity for advocacy purposes could only advance the cause. That was quite frightening,

because of course I knew that many people would also react angrily and perhaps sue me for slander or defamation.'

**The move from outrage to BalanceTonBar was caused by anger. How did you make the next step, from hashtag to impact?**

Maité Meeûs: 'I published the testimonies one by one, and with the small knowledge I had at the time, I also tried to help people, refer them, ... The first intention was simple: I wanted the stories to be released, the experiences to be shared, I wanted to *'libérer la parole'*. By sharing the stories, I aimed to enable the conversation about violence against women, about the police's problematic handling of victims and the justice system's poor handling of perpetrators – only one out of every hundred perpetrators

of sexual violence is eventually convicted. I also wanted the conversation to be deepened, from nightlife sexual violence to gender-based violence as a whole.'

'The name Balance Ton Bar refers to a French hashtag that emerged after the global #MeToo movement: #BalanceTonPorc. Balance is slang for 'throw it out', 'make it public' or 'expose'. In this case: if someone has acted as a pig, bring it out into the open. In our case: expose misconduct from or in your bar on the public forum, so everyone knows what's going on.'

'The focus on nightlife allowed us to make it very clear how the patriarchal culture around parties and festivals, with images of hypersexualised women to attract men, provides the structure beneath the violence. That structure makes it impossible to achieve true gender equality in society and it shows itself very often close at home. Statistics show that a significant proportion of gender-violence is perpetrated by people close to the survivors —whether through domestic violence, intrafamilial abuse, or other forms of intimate partner violence. We know that the chances of being raped by a close



© archive Maité Meeûs



acquaintance are even higher than the chances of being drugged and abused in the basement of a bar.

### **So it's not just about punishing 'deranged perpetrators', but about eradicating structures that legitimise everyday violence?**

Maïté Meeûs: 'Exactly. Moreover, I am convinced that we will not make any progress until men become aware of the problem and commit themselves to doing something about it. If only because men hold more positions of power; are more represented in the police or among security personnel. Following the Gisèle Pelicot case, fellow activists launched an op-ed, and I joined efforts to gather signatures. We noticed that while many women spoke out, relatively few men did. So, we reached out to actors, rappers, writers, and other prominent men. The fact that over 200 men signed the op-ed was incredibly impactful.'

### **In relation to the police: few women confidently go to the police station to report their experiences of sexual violence, apparently.**

Maïté Meeûs: 'As a result of BalanceTonBar, the municipality of Ixelles conducted a survey, which revealed, among other things, that an overwhelming majority of 96% reported having experienced at least one instance of gender-based or sexual violence. 15 percent of the respondents had already been drugged against their will. But also that only 36 percent considered going to the police with it. This mistrust has its reasons. Police are far too little trained to deal with victims of sexual violence, and this tends to lead to victim blaming and demeaning questions, comments or procedures. We call that secondary victimization. For racialized women, the situation can often be even more challenging due to generalized assumptions about certain cultures and imposed expectations regarding their behaviour.'

'Among private security personnel, the problem is even bigger because the law that regulates the security sector; does not impose any prior training in terms of sexual violence or dealing with victims.'

Even after the update of 2017, this law remains deficient in this regard. Moreover, testimonies show that sometimes the private security guards are also simply the perpetrators. They use their position of power to harass victims.'

*The bouncer at El Café, one of the cafes at the centre of the 2021 actions, was sentenced to 50 months in jail for forcing a visitor on the toilet to perform oral sex. His sentence was a success for the movement. But BalanceTonBar's 'patient zero' - the barman of Waff, accused of two cases of rape - got off much lighter. On VRT's Sunday current affairs programme, criminal lawyer and media figure Walter Damen called the actions to convict the man 'a digital form of the Middle Ages with a pillory and unbridled revenge'. The Brussels prosecutor's office was not demanding a sentence for the man because, among other things, he has already been 'lynched' on social media. The prosecutor agreed to a suspension, arguing that the accused was already sufficiently punished on social media. On January 29, the judge acquitted the man all together.*

*Maïté Meeûs is unusually sharp in her reaction: 'The way the court is showing sympathy for the perpetrator leads to an underestimation of the*

damage done to the victims. What does that mean, his life being damaged by the online actions? What about the lives of the victims, really?' Together with other activists, Meeûs wrote an opinion piece for *Le Vif*, saying: 'We believe it is essential to denounce these problematic media and judicial treatments, which perpetuate and fuel rape culture by trivialising our society's globalised oppression and making survivors' voices invisible.' One of the subtitles of the piece speaks volumes: 'A rape trivialised is a rape legitimised.' The whole narrative turning perpetrators into victims underlines the fact that the system continues to disadvantage women, she believes. And part of her indignation is directed at the media: 'There are guidelines about reporting on sexual violence, but most media outlets flout those rules.' In a press release on January 29, she adds about the victims: 'They are encouraged to speak out and then criticised for doing so.'

**BalanceTonBar, meanwhile, did produce a bunch of initiatives to better protect women.**

Maité Meeûs: 'A significant step forward is that the movement led to a change in

the sexual criminal code, incorporating the notion of chemical submission. The sexual criminal code was revised in 2022, I believe, as it was outdated. It now includes essential updates such as the incorporation of incest, the recognition of chemical submission, a redefined concept of rape, and many other positive changes.'

'In the early months of the movement, it also resulted in a lot of promises. Those were encouraging, but reality remains more obstinate. We worked with all kinds of policymakers. In December 2021, for instance, the State Secretary for Equal Opportunities of the Brussels Region announced an action plan and provided the considerable budget of 610,000 euros to realise it. A third of that amount went to grassroots initiatives, a third was provided for training of nightlife staff, and a third was to serve public awareness. The first was useful, the second necessary and the third made very little sense, not in the way the funds were used anyway.'



© Clémence Tondut

**In other words, no matter how much awareness you create, you will always hit the wall of tradition, institutional inertia and ingrained gender injustice?**

Maïté Meeûs: 'And sometimes that is discouraging, yes. When I learned that the barman might get off without punishment, I asked a friend if it all still made sense. Should we still continue with our actions? How often do we need to denounce the fact that women's freedom in public spaces and during parts of the day is limited by insecurity? How often do we need to repeat this is unacceptable? Of course, I am careful, but at the same time I refuse to live in a world where women "need to be careful" while perpetrators of violence still walk free.'

'Of course, sometimes we achieve small victories or even big breakthroughs, like expanding the Centres de Prise en charge des Violences Sexuelles (CPVS) or Zorgcentra (ZSG) in Belgium. Ten of them are now active and six out of ten survivors prefer these centres to lodge their complaint or tell their story. For every Belgian, there is now such a



shelter less than an hour away, with specialised staff, all forensic facilities and an environment that puts the human dignity of the survivors at the centre.'

'A lot has also changed in public opinion because of BalanceTonBar. When I started it, it was hugely controversial - especially because we named locations or when we conducted that one investigation with the media (RTBF) and named perpetrators. All this criticism made me very anxious, so I literally started locking myself up in my little flat. Two friends who tried to support me then advised me to breathe well and deeply. 'Open your window, let some oxygen in.' I did the same, and as a result I heard a group of young people on the

pavement outside discussing BalanceTonBar while I saw them from far away, on their phone, scrolling on the Instagram account.'

'After BalanceTonBar gained a lot of visibility in Brussels and French-speaking Belgium, I also started getting a lot of reactions from France. Young women who had similar stories about Lille, Paris, Marseille, Lyon ... I wanted to do something with that, but not in a way that the message for Belgium would drown in a sea of international stories. So I opened one page per major city each time and looked for volunteers to further manage those pages. In the end, we had 55 different pages in Belgium, France, Spain and Tunisia. It was very decentralised, very grassroots, and therefore very empowering for everyone involved. It also produced beautiful friendships, including from the person who ran the page for Grenoble. She now lives in Brussels and has become one of my best friends.'

**You've given anger about sexual violence a platform, which has also prompted policymakers into action. The next step you have taken is an initiative to care for victims. Public initiatives are not sufficient?**

Maïté Meeûs: 'After listening to testimonies, I usually asked what I could still do for the victim. Did she want to file a complaint, did she need help with that, did she need a doctor or a therapist? And the most common answer was: I need to talk to someone about what happened, the trauma I now live with and the hardships I have to go through. This was a need that I could not meet myself: I am not a therapist, I cannot handle dozens of people, I would get too involved myself. So I referred people to professionals, often in *Centres de Santé Mentale*. But accessibility, affordability as well as approach proved problematic in many cases.'

'Besides, I was also convinced that really no one should have to pay for the care they need to recover from sexual violence perpetrated on them. That rebuilding one's life after trauma was a necessity, not a luxury. And so I decided to set up

an alternative myself. With specialised therapists, with sufficient funding so that participants don't have to pay, and with both individual counselling and group therapy on offer.'

**You called that initiative Artémise. Why?**



Maïté Meeûs: 'The name refers to Artemisia Gentileschi, an Italian painter from the 17th century. She was raped by Agostino Tassi, her mentor and friend of her father, who was also a painter. Artemisia herself became exceptionally well known and appreciated in the male-dominated artistic world of her time and also used her painting to focus on the struggle of women. Among other things, she painted the famous scene in which Judith beheads Holofernes. Choosing Artémise is also in line with my fundamental belief that art can express what would otherwise remain unsaid and is an incredibly powerful tool for healing. By the way, we want to expand the offer to include art therapy and make it accessible to all.'

**The P&V Foundation recognises the importance of your actions with the Citizenship Award. What does that mean to you?**

Maïté Meeûs: 'For me, this award reflects the importance of staying true to my purpose, despite the hardships. I was never able to remain passive in the face of injustice, particularly when it comes to gender-based violence, as it

resonates deeply with me. I feel compelled to seek solutions, address injustices, or at least try to make a difference—it's simply who I am.'

'However, this recognition is not about me. It belongs to the grassroots workers, the activists, and those who shared their testimonies, without whom we wouldn't have come this far: It also honours everyone who mobilized, marched, spoke up, and took a stand. We are nothing without the strength of a community—this is not an individual endeavour.'

'I do feel driven by a mission that sometimes feels larger than myself, but I try to find balance. I was raised with the belief that everyone has a mission in life, and for me, part of that mission—while also allowing space for my own life—is to fight against sexual and gender-based violence and to support survivors in rebuilding their lives.'

'The sisterhood and resilience shown by survivors inspire me profoundly. Once you have found your drive, the key is to stay true to it, persevere, and work towards creating impact and initiating change.'

**Being passionate is one side of the story. The other side is to be listened to and taken seriously. How hard is that for you, as a young woman?**

Maïté Meeûs: 'Being heard and being truly listened to are already two very different things, being taken seriously is a third one. I look young and I'm soft-spoken by nature, this doesn't really help to be taken seriously in the world of power and decisionmakers. Some have a preconceived idea of who I might be and some are convinced that I do not know what I am talking about. To be fair, those are in general the same people who do not believe in the data that revolves around sexual violence or the sociological concepts developed overtime to tackle the subject of gender inequality. I often feel that in public discussions or during TV debates.'

'A crucial lesson, which fortunately I learned very quickly, is that someone like me should not rely on the traditional media to make her voice heard. That's why I created my own platform on social media. We empower ourselves. We make ourselves visible. And once that succeeds, other media do start taking you seriously.'

**Social media provide a useful platform if you have anger or outrage to share. But if you want to talk about structures or caring for survivors, the algorithms often fail, don't they?**

Maïté Meeûs: 'That's true. But a platform like Instagram does remain a huge tool in our hands. In September, on a Thursday night, I decided to organise a demonstration in solidarity with Gisèle Pelicot on Friday afternoon. We managed to bring 350 people to the streets in just a few hours, thanks to Instagram. Of course, Instagram has its own agenda and its own algorithms, but it is still extremely powerful. And to be clear, that does not prevent our message from reaching far beyond the Instagram generation. People over 60 sometimes come up to me to say that the BalanceTonBar-actions have made them aware of the problem and that they now think differently about it than before. One such woman has since taken up crucial volunteer work for BalanceTonBar.'

**How does your mother view the activism of her daughter and the younger generation?**

Maité MeeÛs: 'In the beginning she was worried, especially about the possible consequences, the toxic language on social media and the threats against me. It turns out there are quite a few people around who get very angry and even aggressive because of our actions. Naturally, my mother was scared that things would get completely out of hand. But in the meantime,

her support for the actions prevails, as well as some pride for what I have started and realised. Ditto for my grandparents. They are in their nineties and do not always have an easy time grasping what our fight always stands for, but recently I saw that my grandfather bought a book about sexual violence and he proudly showed it to me as he was trying to better understand our advocacy. Isn't that hopeful? A 93-year-old man who wants to know more and understand better what his granddaughter is talking about on Instagram!'

'It fuels my belief in the possibility of building a better world. That sounds idealistic, but I really believe in it. Even small steps, even non-perfect solutions are better than the cynicism that rules the world. That belief also helps me accept my own mistakes or shortcomings. We cannot afford the luxury of waiting for actions and activists to be perfect, we have to move forward with what we can or know and with who we are.'

**How do you keep your own head above water in the storm you have created?**

Maité MeeÛs: 'I often say that joy is an act of resistance, and I truly believe that. The joy that comes from moments shared in community is a profound source of peace, renewal, and strength for me. Art, in all its forms, is my sanctuary—it's where I find balance. I spend a lot of time creating, whether it's composing music, drawing, or painting. Music has been at the heart of my life since childhood, and I deeply believe in its power to heal and rebuild, as it has done for me.'

'I've inherited this love for creativity from my mother, who was a guitar teacher and an



artist at heart. I'm passionate and curious by nature, always eager to explore new things. A few months ago, I became a certified yoga teacher. Now, I'm delving into painting, reading voraciously, and experimenting with aerial silks and combat sports. I also find a great sense of peace in nature, often walking in the Bois de la Cambre.'

'I am in awe of life and everything art has to offer. This sense of wonder, coupled with my creative outlets, helps me stay grounded and at peace with myself, even amidst the storm. It's my way of finding resilience and embracing the beauty of existence.'



## Biography

**1998:** Born in Brussels

**2016:** Studies Economics and Management for Art, Culture and Communication at the Bocconi University

**2021:** Launches the “Balance Ton Bar” movement aimed at giving a voice to victims of sexual violence in the nightlife scene in Brussels. Since then, Balance-ton-Bar Instagram pages have been created in 55 cities of 4 countries.

**2022:** Receives the Amnesty International Youth Human Rights Award

**2024:** Finds the non-profit organization Artémise, which provides comprehensive support to survivors of sexual violence, offering a safe space for them to share their experiences and rebuild their lives with dignity.

**2024:** Named as one of the Forbes' 30 Under 30 young leaders'

## LAUDATION

## SOFIE PEETERS

**Born in 1986:** Master in Communication Sciences and Audiovisual Arts

**2012:** Gained recognition with her documentary *'Femme de la rue'*, while studying at RITCS, which deals with street harassment and led to the creation of the anti-sexism law in Belgium.

**2017:** Awarded from the Institute for the Equality of Women and Men for her work and commitment.

**2021:** Created the podcast *'Geen kleine man'* about the female body, in collaboration with Audiocollectief Schik.

**2024:** Published *'Het Vrouwenlijf en wat we er niet over weten'*, Acco Learn Edition, 206p.

For over 10 years, Sofie has been an engaged storyteller: she writes, films, and creates podcasts. Gender is the common thread throughout her work, covering topics such as the rigid beauty standards for women, discrimination against fathers, genital mutilation, and more.

In addition, Sofie works as a communication consultant to support organizations. In this role, she assists victims of sexual misconduct when their stories reach the media. She is godmother of the non-profit organization *'Touche pas à ma pôte'*, which fights against street harassment with 5D training and additional training for police forces.

Do you know the saying *'Vechten tegen de bierkaai'*, *'Lutter contre la baie de la bière'*, 'Fighting against the beer quay'? It is an old Dutch proverb that means 'trying to achieve the impossible, engaging in a losing battle'. The 'beer quay' or 'beer dock' is a historical place in Amsterdam where barrels of beer were delivered and stored centuries ago. The men who worked there were incredibly strong due to carrying those heavy beer barrels. Anyone who started a fight with them was doomed to lose from the start...

Fast forward to the 21st century. The 23-year-old Maïté Meeûs, a frail young woman from Brussels, has had enough of that beer quay. Sure, those men are strong. And okay, maybe she won't win a fight with them. But she's going to try anyway. Because Maïté believes in another proverb: 'together we are strong.'

There are many of them, the group of girls and women who have been victims of sexual harassment in Brussels' nightlife. They were treated disrespectfully, touched unwantedly, or even raped after drugs were put in their drinks. Everyone knew this was happening,



but it was silently tolerated. Why? Because it's hard to stand up against forces that seem so much bigger and stronger than yourself. And because you... maybe blame yourself? Or at least that's what you might wonder. Or what your environment might wonder. Because maybe as a young woman in that bar, you drank a bit too much? You don't remember what happened? Oh, maybe you agreed then? Or did you dance a bit too provocatively and gave someone the wrong idea? Is it your fault?...

No. The 23-year-old Maïté has had enough of that powerful beer quay and the iron-strong stereotypes. She launches 'Balance ton bar', an Instagram page where she gives a platform to victims to speak about their experiences. And thus break the silent acceptance. What follows is impressive: a flood of testimonies. One story after another comes out. But where most people might be overwhelmed, Maïté remained focused. She met with political cabinets and Brussels nightclubs. Her calls made bars start taking responsibility. Certain staff members were not only fired but also prosecuted. Other staff followed training to help combat this is-

## 'FIGHTING AGAINST THE BEER QUAY'

SOFIE PEETERS

sue of sexual harassment. To create a safe environment for everyone to dance, drink, and party. If you now go to the women's toilet in a Brussels bar, there's a good chance you'll see a flyer with instructions: 'If you are harassed or see something happening, you can send a WhatsApp message to this number.' Or ask for 'Angela' at the bar. The code word to indicate you need help. And that's not all. Maïté also founded the non-profit organization 'Artémise', which supports victims of sexual violence. It is a place where people can safely share their stories and find help to recover.

In my own work with victims of harassment, I have seen time and again how difficult it is to speak out. How high the barriers are. How deep the fear of victim blaming is. And that fear is often justified. We need people like Maïté, who create a shockwave and show that it is not the fault of that one woman. That it is about structural, deeply rooted problems. In recent years, there has been more safety and openness for victims to speak out. And that is an essential factor in tackling sexual harassment.

But let's not be naive about it. I know better than anyone that such a fight comes with a downside, a kind of hangover. I was only 25 years old when I first stood up against sexual harassment in Brussels. With my hidden camera, I went out on the street and filmed the behaviour, but also the conversations I had with perpetrators. The result was my documentary 'Femme de la rue'. Daring to stand up against sexual harassment brings a lot of praise, grateful messages from victims. You can debate this issue on radio and television, make a difference, help people... It is incredibly valuable. But you also have to deal with hate messages from internet trolls, even death threats. Certain Brussels neighbourhoods are better avoided afterward... This also applies to Maïté. And even more so, it applies to many women who speak out against injustice, especially when it concerns gender, color, or sexual orientation. Research shows that they are at the greatest risk of experiencing a strong backlash, both in the digital and real world. But in my eyes, this makes her journey even stronger. Because you not only have to fight the battle, you also have to be able to endure it. Despite that hangover.

So it is with great pride and love that we present this citizenship award to you, Maïté. You have single-handedly given a new meaning to the proverb 'fighting against the beer quay'. It is no longer 'engaging in a losing battle' or 'trying to achieve the impossible'. Thanks to you, it is now 'Fighting together and continuing to fight, despite the hangover.'

# Sta op tegen straat intimidatie

Le... uten  
... elijk  
... tie  
... men



## THE LAUREATE

## SEPPE NOBELS

### Interview by Gie Goris

*Seppe Nobels was not a high-flyer at school, until he was allowed to attend Hotelschool Ter Duinen in Koksijde. Later, he made a name for himself as the head chef of restaurant Graanmarkt 13 in Antwerp, where he based his dishes on fresh vegetables sourced from the outskirts of the city. In recent years, he was particularly committed to giving vulnerable groups a place in society through the kitchen. 'Instroom' was a hybrid between a training centre and an experience restaurant, where he surprised guests with preparations from the home countries of refugees and asylum seekers, reworked with local and seasonal vegetables. He worked out the same concept with the temporary project at the Oud Gasthuis in Mechelen. Together with Dieter Coppens, he also opened the doors of Restaurant Misverstand, where staff are diagnosed with young-onset dementia. After receiving a green Michelin star for his vegetable-inspired cuisine and sustainable philosophy, he won Het Gouden Kookboek, the most prestigious culinary-literary award in the*

*Dutch-speaking region. He received the Prize of Equality in 2021 and now the Foundation P&V Citizenship Award 2024.*

'Actually, one should always be able to give informed consent for everything you eat,' Seppe Nobels says in the course of the interview. 'Today we allow substances into our bodies without consent, things we have not asked for; that can be harmful or that we simply reject. Comparing it to sexual harassment may be too far-reaching, but perhaps there is something in it. Because the food you allow into your body is a form of intimacy, and that includes consent and trust, and perhaps desire.'

Nobels does not shy away from strong statements, but he generously explains his one-liners. 'Food as intimacy obviously clashes with how we often treat food today, which we order as a quick bite at the drive-in and then move on rather than dwell on it. We no longer realise

that a cow died for our burgers, that our bodies do not need the fatty mash we eat, that nature has its own rhythms with which it feeds us in relation to the weather: Corn salad and purslane contain a lot of iron, which you need in winter to armour yourself against the cold outside, just as the vitamin C from citrus fruits is important to absorb the sun's radiation in summer.'

'There is always a story in food,' he concludes, 'we just need to learn to listen much better. Perhaps that is my calling: to tell those stories so that many people start thinking about them. I want to share my passion and follow it.'

We are sitting in the refugee tent, in the first room of Nobel's experience restaurant 't Gasthuis in Mechelen, housed in the remains of the building where the Augustinian nuns started the *Our Lady Clinic* in the 12th century. Inside, it is much quieter than at his desk in the high-ceilinged chapel: in the nave, about twenty

guests are enjoying a delicious midday meal. It also feels appropriate to be almost squatting, in an unheated room, exchanging views on food, boundaries and the risks people take.

'You chose the kitchen at a very young age. How did that come about?' I asked to open the conversation. 'To begin with, because a kitchen connects ...', Seppe Nobels tried, but I immediately broke him off with a stern: 'That's an explanation you came up with afterwards. As a 12-year-old ...' Nobels continues: '... that was not the way I will have framed it then, but it was the way I felt it at the time.' From then on, the conversation was in the right mood.

'The most important moment of the day was the time we spent at the table at home in the evening. My parents were career people who also often had to leave after dinner; but mum did cook and both also made sure they were very present during that hour together at the table

## 'THE TASTE OF CONNECTION'

SEPPE NOBELS



with my sister and me. It is also at that table that I learned the importance of the seasons: when do asparagus start, when is it time for small game or big game, from when are tomatoes ripe? Food was always more than food. It was being together; it was the cycle of the year; it had to be literally and figuratively nourishing. And it was sharing: people were always welcome at our table: an aunt, neighbours, people who were having a hard time.'

**At what point did those experiences and feelings translate into a 'career choice'? Because at 14, you left for Koksijde at hotel school for the week.**

Seppe Nobels: 'I realised very quickly that I was better with my hands than with the books. My school results were pitiful. That was not evident in a family where dad had an architect's degree and was in politics, where mum was an actress and therefore busy with texts all day, and where my sister eventually obtained three university degrees. When the marks of a test or an exam were read out in class - which still happened then, sorry for the sensitive souls - the end was often, 'And then

there is also Mr Nobels, but we're going to leave that as it is, so as not to spoil the good atmosphere.' That sometimes made me doubt myself. But I did liven up at the table and when I could help in the kitchen or in preparing or clearing the table. I wanted to get good marks, of course, but for that I had to find a place, an education, a school where I could become an achiever.'

'When I had to start secondary school at 12, I would have preferred a vocational rather than a general direction, but my parents still wanted me to get a good education and a solid diploma. After two years, I forced my choice by submitting the exams blank. It was my way of saying: I want to leave here, I want to work with my hands. Sometimes, you have to dare to take risks. It worked and my parents helped me look for the best hotel school, and I ended up in Koksijde. That's where my whole world changed, because suddenly I was in class with all the kids who had grown up in a hotel or restaurant. They had more experience and business knowledge, I probably had more passion. I had had to fight to get into that school, some of them might have lost the battle for their own choice and were in

the class to take over the family business later.'

**Seppe Nobels entered the social menu as someone who wanted to change the world from the kitchen. You did that first and foremost with a radical choice for vegetables, short food supply chain and urban agriculture.**

Seppe Nobels: 'Maybe that has to do with the great-grandfather I never knew, but about whom my mum told me all about: about his cauliflower field and how he went to the early market every morning to sell his vegetables. But perhaps it has mostly to do with the belief that we should do what gives strength and follow what the gut feeling says.'

'I like to look at and approach things differently. Our diet needs to make more sense by going back to the basics. So we should not double down to invent fancy new flavours, but on the contrary return to the core: healthy, nutritious and connecting food. That's the flavour I want to serve and let people taste, that's what I want people to think about. To achieve that, one also has to invest love and a soul as a cook. An

Afghan or Nepalese assistant chef who is only allowed to shuck the mussels without knowing where the preparation comes from cannot serve wonderful food. But when that person gets the chance to prepare the mussels with the kitchen knowledge from home, you get real soul food!

'For me, it always starts with questioning what is established or passed on as authoritative.

At hotel school, I learned how to make broth according to August Escoffier, the founder of French gastronomy, who wrote the first cooking bible with his *Le Guide Culinaire*. His method did not seem logical to me and I now make my fond my way. Authority arguments have never worked for me.'

'I am also quirky when it comes to preparing vegetables. Customers were not embarrassed

to lecture me on that either, even though I had already been voted the best vegetable chef in the Benelux in the Gault Millau. Some people claimed that my asparagus were not cooked, but I cooked them differently. Not in water, because then the flavour of asparagus disappears with the cooking water: I then look for other solutions, from barbecue to vacuum steaming. One sometimes has to dare to take risks and you always have to question apparent certainties.'

**If you yourself had to describe Seppie Nobels in a flavour, which would it be?**

Seppie Nobels: 'There are only four or maximum five flavours: salty, sour, sweet and bitter: According to Latin Americans, there is additionally the taste of grilled or roasted, and according to Asians, the fifth flavour is umami (strong savoury, salty or brothy). None of those flavours would sufficiently describe Seppie Nobels.'

'Perhaps there is only one taste that really suits me, and that is the taste of water: Everything in the kitchen is water: No ingredient contains





less than sixty percent water. It also makes a difference whether you grow vegetables in aquaculture using water from a barrel, or grow the same vegetables next to a mountain river. Even humans themselves are made up of some seventy percent water. So water connects everyone and everything. When I dip my hands here in the Dyle, they feel the same water as my Afghan student's mother somewhere along the Helmand River. That is why I would choose the taste of water to characterise myself, because it is the taste of connection. That is the flavour of my work, of my vision of being human.'

'I worked in top restaurants in Italy and France, where even top chefs went for the trend of the moment. The top Catalan restaurant *El Bulli* was doing textures or in Sweden they were experimenting with mosses ... and so everyone had to or wanted to go in the same direction. In the process, a huge amount of regional knowledge and wealth was lost. The delicious aubergines, tomatoes and good wine of Provence were relegated to side dishes, while a copy of what someone else had successfully made was promoted to main course. What nonsense! I didn't want to go along with that



with my own restaurant. I wanted to build on local strengths and what I believed in. That meant not only a main role for vegetables, but also bowls in the middle of the table, instead of always individual portions. Or a side dish of three pieces of chicory for a table of two. I even had to come and explain that as a chef: why not four? My response was, 'I want you guys to talk about the food. That you decide who gets the third piece, or that you cut it in half. I want you, when you leave the restaurant, to be very aware that you have eaten chicory.' Not everyone went along with that, and so I did get responses like, 'Enough cinema, just give us an extra piece of chicory.'

**There seem to be two polarities in your cuisine: an emphasis on local, seasonal vegetables and a focus on the dishes and recipes of all those who come to this country from far-flung places. How do you connect the short food supply chain with global refugee stories?**

Seppé Nobels: 'In any case, the starting point is that I am a diehard Belgian chef. I love our terroir. That goes beyond soil and vegetables, it

also supports our own agriculture and crafts. You can eat falafel, sushi, burgers and pizza anywhere in the world these days. A handful of global chains are conquering the world, displacing the distinctiveness of local cuisines. Besides: a sushi with cucumber has travelled ten thousand kilometres in containers before it reaches our plates. Those who want to reduce their carbon footprint are better off choosing locally grown pork chops with Belgian pickles than rice or quinoa.'

'So when I get to work with Eritreans, Afghans or Palestinians, I am interested in the dishes and the stories, the ingredients and the method of preparation, in short, the soul of cuisine. But if Ibrahim's Eritrean soup has manioc as its base, we look for a local substitute - which we found in butternut with its similar texture. The result is a new Belgian cuisine. The pumpkin farmer from Putte near Mechelen is super happy that he was able to supply four hundred butternuts in a short time already, and Ibrahim is happy to be able to send his mother images of her soup being on the menu in Belgium.'

**'There are no illegal flavours,' you once said.**

Seppé Nobels: 'With that, I was talking not only about cuisine, but about the madness that rules the world. Why are my children legal and the children of some of my collaborators illegal? I continue to believe that no human being is illegal. With our passports, we can travel the world to explore, to study, to work, to relax. But if the inhabitants of the countries we visit want to make the reverse voyage, and have to risk their lives for it, suddenly they turn out to be illegal? People have always migrated and will always migrate. That's not illegal, that's normal.' 'We celebrate Christmas, but who knows anymore that in doing so we commemorate the birth of a child born to refugees, in inhuman conditions, while the regime ordered a mass murder of male children for fear that that one baby would challenge the world empire? We have been commemorating those facts for two thousand years now, but have we learnt anything from them? Extraordinarily little, it appears time and again.'

'And if we are not careful, the day will come when certain tastes will be outlawed. So during a debate on VRT, I threw it to N-VA member of parliament Theo Francken that I will continue working as long as there are no illegal flavours. A few days later, five thousand people had made reservations at 't *Gasthuis*. Thank you, Mr Francken!'

**You have travelled a very diverse path up to here: from starred restaurants to your own vegetable restaurant, from the TV series *Restaurant Miverstand* with young-demented people via experience restaurant *Instroom* in Antwerp and 't *Gasthuis*, where you prepare newcomers for the Belgian catering industry. What ingredients must a project have to be a real Seppe Nobels project?**

Seppe Nobels: 'One: trust in the knowledge and vision of others, especially outside your own field. An example was *Een Kookboek*, which hardly anyone believed in, but which has now sold 40,000 copies and was named a Golden Cookbook, the most important culinary-literary award in the Dutch-speaking world, and at the

Shanghai Book Fair it was awarded the best book in the world in its category. I wrote that book after ten years of working in which I had not opened any other cookbook. I didn't talk to other chefs, but I did talk to fashion icon Dries Van Noten and architect and designer Vincent Van Duysen, furniture designer Hans Le Compte, actor Jan Decler, doctors and anyone who excels in their profession. I asked them how they would put a dish on a plate, and why. One day, Jean Paul Gaultier came to dinner at *Graanmarkt 13* and I asked him in the kitchen to arrange the dishes he had just eaten to his own preferences. What colours inspired him, and to what end? He was hugely enthusiastic about that question, and his answers influenced me afterwards.'

'Two: listening.'

**That was not the impression you gave a short while ago. At the start of the tour, you very quickly took over the newcomers' story to tell it yourself.**

Seppe Nobels: 'The main factor here is the newcomers' sense of uncertainty. They are

often in an asylum procedure and always fear that pieces of their story could be used against them. That is why I tell large parts of the story, so that any mistake becomes my mistake. This is also a bit typical of Seppe Nobels, I'm afraid: I own my projects 100%. For years in *Graanmarkt 13*, I was the first to open the door and the last to turn the key again.'

'In 't *Gasthuis*, too, I want to constantly make sure that everything runs smoothly in every space - although I am gradually getting to a point where I realise that it is no major problem when the gravy ends up a little more beside than on the dish. Moreover, expanding this project and creating an even greater impact will only be possible by involving the right people. Just as the whole *Gasthuis* could only become a success thanks to Nico Dockx, artist and teacher, and Charuwan Pauwels, who gave up her career in a multinational company to take on the business side here. They have offered their services, and because I have allowed them and thus shared some of the ownership, this project can grow. Their commitment also gives me tremendous peace of mind.'



'That is at once the third characteristic of a Seppe Nobels project: sharing. Sharing what we have and what we know is essential, of course. Not claiming: this belongs to me, but knowing: this belongs to all of us. I say: Flanders belongs to all of us.'

'Sharing the responsibility of the current project with Charuwan and Nico allows me to zoom out and engage with the bigger story from January 2025 onwards. I want to understand better what I am actually doing. And I want to make that stronger; by stepping out of the kitchen and into the world for a while. Today I am inspired by a Syrian refugee and his dishes, but tomorrow I want to visit his parents in Syria. To get to know the story behind that warm man and those delicious dishes. I have had 35 ministers of Immigration and Integration at the restaurant in the past, tomorrow I want to look for their projects and what inspiration I could take from them. I want to go and look at a company like *Best Water Technology*, which aims to give everyone in the world access to drinking water by 2035, and observe their work

in the field to see what they are actually doing and what I can learn from them.'

**You are putting together today's menu based on dishes and recipes brought to Mechelen by refugees. Which dishes particularly inspired you?**

Seppe Nobels: 'A few years ago I worked out

a dish with mlukhiye to reconcile two trainees. They were both from Aleppo, Syria. One was Kurdish, the other Arab, and their family names immediately told a story of mutual violence. We were able to bridge that hatred thanks to a folk dance from Aleppo, which they both danced, and the dish with mlukhiye, because they both knew and used the plant. Today, we serve a Palestinian tartare to which the green mlukhiye



© archive Seppe Nobels

leaf is added. It is an ingredient found in the stories of Christians, Jews and Muslims alike. This jute-plant is viewed in Europe as a weed - something everyone wants to get rid of. But in the Middle East, the little plant carries a lot of meaning. Muslims, for example, dry it on the roof of the house where the oldest man in the family lives. The dried mlukhiye is incorporated into dishes prepared on the occasion of special events or celebrations. The two men from Aleppo are best friends now, sharing a house in Antwerp. There is no better example of the connecting power of food, I think'

### **It is also an example of how much tradition and history food can contain.**

Seppe Nobels: 'Indeed. Which brings us straight to my second dish: asparagus à la flamande - the only vegetarian classic in Flemish cuisine, all the rest are meat or fish dishes: Gentse waterzooi, tomatoes crevettes, ... It's a classic that can only be served during four months, but that's why I cherish it even more. Today, white asparagus is really 'from here', but the first white asparagus takes us back to classical Egypt. It is written

about in a sarcophagus from 2800 BC. And the fact that today Mechelen (postal number 2800!!!) is the centre of asparagus cultivation is delightful, isn't it? Together with a student from the Middle East, I therefore created asparagus à la Cairo. Very tasty, but not quite as good as *à la flamande*.'

'Another story I will never forget is a preparation with beetroot, which was really impossible for one of the trainees. Working with beetroot confronted her too much with a trauma from the war she had fled. It evoked blood and the experience of having to shelter under ensiled beetroot and survive on it for a week. We then started making dishes with beetroot with the other trainees, and she could assemble a new dish from the best of what the others suggested - without touching beetroot. At the end, she also served it to the customers. None of that was easy, and at one point she stood before me with tears in her eyes - but I believed that those dishes could eventually help her get over the grief and trauma - in a better way than by banishing the beetroot from her kitchen.'

### **Connection doesn't necessarily mean avoiding anything that might evoke grief or trauma?**

Seppe Nobels: 'Confronting your violated past is something I learn from my trainees. And often we massage that confrontation with humour. At the same time, they learn to enjoy every day they are given, despite and with all those deep traumas. When you realise how heavy the backpack of loss and grief is with which many people arrive here, all the whining about autumn leaves in the garden becomes really intolerable! The real stories in this country are about parents who felt their child drown during the crossing. Who had to leave everything and pieces of themselves behind.'

### **And then we have to talk about the stars, awards and recognition you got ...**

Seppe Nobels: 'Just yesterday: the Foodie of the Year for the second year in a row, by June magazine!'

**And now you also get the Citizenship Award. What does that mean for someone who should be used to being awarded prizes by now?**

Seppe Nobels: 'The term citizenship already evokes equality, and that gives me great pleasure. When I am in the kitchen with refugees or people with young-onset dementia, I am one of them, even though everyone addresses me as 'chef'. I scrub the floor and polish the appliances as much as others. I am a one among others, a citizen like any other citizen. And I am well aware that I alone cannot change anything about society, because we have to be many and we have to work together and speak up about the same issues together. And we need to have the patience to gather enough people around an idea so that our voices and our demands can be loud without us shouting - because no one needs that right now.'

**Inevitably, citizenship is also politics. Can a kitchen be political?**

Seppe Nobels: 'Of course. For example, I was given the opportunity by Michel Moortgat to create another Duvel beer alongside the

classic Duvel. For that, I started from the biggest refugee groups entering Belgium: Eritreans, Somalis, Afghans, Syrians and Ukrainians. From each of those regions of origin, I added a spice to the Duvel - which is now called *Illegally Blond*. That beer tastes like migration.'

'In 't *Gasthuis*, too, we cook politically every day: we show and offer the taste of how things can be done differently. But we also go further. Once a trainee came in with a black eye. He had got it after a heated discussion with a homeless person, in the Antwerp metro. When I started talking about this with the other course participants, I got a flood of stories about how aggressively homeless people often treated them - even though, like these trainees, they live at the bottom or in the periphery of society. That is why we now offer free meals to homeless and underprivileged people every afternoon. No one has to prove that they are destitute, just as I don't ask anyone for papers when they want to participate in training. That meal creates an opportunity to talk and listen, based on the realities they lived through, rather than on politically manipulated incitement. Now that is really a political kitchen, I would say.'





© Foundation P&V

## Biography

**1982:** Born in Bonheiden

Seppe trained in the culinary arts at Hotelschool Ter Duinen (Koksijde), and later in various top restaurants both domestically and abroad.

**2005:** Wins four of the six main prizes in the ‘Best Junior Chef of Belgium’ competition.

**2010:** Opens Restaurant “Graanmarkt 13” in Antwerp. It features a kitchen where vegetables play a prominent role, with respect for natural flavours, regional products, and sustainability.

**2015:** Awarded ‘Chef of the Best Vegetable Restaurant of Flanders’ in the Green GaultMillau.

**2021:** Receives a Green Michelin star for his vegetable-inspired cuisine and sustainable culinary philosophy.

**2021:** Launches “Instroom Academy”, where he prepares dishes with non-native newcomers that evoke memories of the

students’ past, each time reinterpreted with local ingredients and respect for the seasons. This unique approach resulted in a Green Michelin star in 2023.

**2021:** Wins the “Prijz van de Gelijkheid” (Equality Prize) for his years of social involvement and radical commitment to sustainability and ecology, and the Golden Cookbook, the most important Dutch culinary-literary prize.

**2024:** Starts a gastronomic training program at “t Gasthuis” in Mechelen. Here, he cooks with refugees for paying guests in the evening and for the homeless and underprivileged at lunchtime.

**2024:** Appointed Commander in the Order of the Crown.

**2024:** Wins an Emmy award for the TV series “Restaurant Misverstand,” in which people with young-onset dementia run a restaurant under the guidance of Seppe Nobels and Dieter Coppens

## LAUDATION

## SANDIP PATEL

**1985:** Born in Gujarat, India

**2007:** Master's degree in marketing with a specialization in Import/Export.

**2015:** Member of pass committee who stands against reservation system depending on casts.

**2016-17:** Elected as youngest leader in his constituency.

**2018:** Arrived in Belgium as a political refugee.

**2021:** Start training at Instroom Academy of Antwerp.

**2024:** Restaurant Manager of *'t Gasthuis* in Mechelen

I am Sandip Patel. I am from India and a political refugee in Belgium. I am the manager of our new restaurant 't Gasthuis in Mechelen. Today, I am here to tell you about Seppe Nobels. But to understand who Seppe Nobels is, you first need to understand why I am writing this text.

My journey in Belgium began in 2018 when I arrived at Brussels Airport while transiting to Canada. It was there that I sought asylum. Many people ask me why I chose Belgium, and I always say: Belgium chose me.

I met Seppe Nobels in 2021 at Instroom Academy, where I was one of his students. One day, Seppe called me, as he often does with students, to ask about my journey, the food from my country, and my memories of home. We began talking, and that conversation lasted more than an hour. At the end of it, he said to me, "Don't worry, I



am behind you." Those words brought new hope and energy into my life.

From that day forward, I never looked back. And today, I am writing this as the restaurant manager for Seppe Nobels.

In everyone's life, there comes a moment when you have to decide: will you close the book or turn the page? When Seppe faced challenges during the difficult COVID-19 period, he didn't close the book. Instead, he turned the page and started a new chapter.

**'DON'T WORRY  
I'M BEHIND  
YOU'**

SANDIP PATEL



# THE MEMBERS OF THE JURY

## Taoufik Amzile

Managing director Ascentis Consulting

## Peter Bosmans

Director Febecoop  
(Belgian Federation of Social and Cooperative Economy)

## Alexandre Cleven

CEO Partena HR

## Saskia De Groof

Delegated Administrator Foundation P&V

## Béatrice Delvaux

Chief editorialist Le Soir

## Edouard Delruelle

Professor University of Liège (ULg) - Philosophy

## Franky Devos

General coordinator Arts centre Viernulvier

## Ariane Estenne

President MOC (Christian workers movement)

## Madeleine Guyot

General director Ligue des Familles (Family Union)

## Benoît Hennaut

Director La Cambre (National School of Visual Arts)

## Philippe Hensmans

Director Amnesty International Belgium (French speaking part)

## Bert Kruismans

Stand-up-comedian, writer and columnist

## Virginie Nguyen Hoang

Photojournalist Collective HUMA – Laureate of the Citizenship Award 2019

## Jan Nolf

Honorary justice of peace – Laureate of the Citizenship Award 2016

## Dunia Oumazza

Project manager Foundation P&V

## Michel Pradolini

President City Pirates (inclusive football club in deprived areas of Antwerp) – Laureate of the Citizenship Award 2018

## Guy Redig

Senior consultant and former lecturer VUB – Social welfare and leisure sciences

## Geert Reyniers

CEO Multipharma

## Olivier Servais

Professor and dean UCL – Anthropology and Co-president of the P&V Foundation

## Jessy Siongers

Professor at VUB and Senior researcher/coordinator at Ghent University – Sociology, and Co-president of the P&V Foundation

## Marnic Speltdoorn

Board of Directors Foundation P&V

## Anneke Stoffels

Editor-in-chief De verzekeringswereld-Le monde des assurances

## Lynn Tytgat

CEO The Merode

### **Marie Vancutsem**

Journalist RTBF

### **Fons Van Dyck**

Director Think/BBDO (strategic brand advice)

### **Cathy Van Remoortere**

Head of Student & Community Affairs AP Hogeschool)

### **Hilde Vernailen**

CEO P&V Group

### **Mirjam Zomersztajn**

Coordinator social program 'Un pont entre deux mondes' - La Monnaie (Federal opera house)

# 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 2024, 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



### **'No' Woodcut**

Maité Meeûs and Seppe Nobels will receive a woodcut on paper, created in 2017, called "No". The title «No» is taken from a series of small sculptures which Aguirre created around 2010 after reading the manifesto «Indignez Vous» (Time for Outrage) by the French writer, diplomat, ambassador, and 2011 citizenship award winner Stéphane Hessel. The author writes of his indignation in the face of injustice in the world. This indignation is one that Philip Aguirre shares with Hessel and is his humanistic drive to create beauty. Beauty as a response to injustice, war, poverty. Beauty is a force, beauty can touch, can comfort, can provoke reflection. 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.*

**Responsible for the publication:** Saskia De Groof

**Coordination:** Saskia De Groof and Dunia Oumazza

**Redaction:** Gie Goris, Saskia De Groof, Dunia Oumazza, Olivier Servais, Jessy Siongers, Sofie Peeters, Sandip Patel and Philip Aguirre y Otegui

**Layout:** Marijke Van de Voorde and MediaComm



**FOUNDATION P&V**

*emancipation participation  
citizenship solidarity*

This publication was released by the  
P&V Foundation, on the occasion of the  
20th Citizenship Award Ceremony 2024.

**P&V Foundation**

Rue Royale, 151  
1210 Brussels  
Belgium

Tel.: 02/250 91 24

E-mail: [fondation@pv.be](mailto:fondation@pv.be)

[www.foundationpv.be](http://www.foundationpv.be)