

**2003**

## **The Street Kid**

Street kids have always been important in Rotterdam, as illustrated by the amount of sculptures dedicated to them in and around the city. Just below Rubroek, is a sculpture of 'Boefje'; 'Ketelbinkie' can be seen in Katendrecht; and two more youths from Rotterdam will soon be honoured with a sculpture: 'Pietje Bell' and 'Kruimeltje'. We look back to the 'good old days' with nostalgia, to a time when it was still honourable to go through life making the streets unsafe with petty crime. Street kids are eternal, and these days they respond to names such as Rachid, Faisal or Pedro. For these street kids however, there is no such monument as yet.

These troublemakers are sooner the subject of unadulterated repression, not of literary representation. The chairman of a district council in Rotterdam argued earlier this year for the creation of punishment camps for Antillean youths and a large delegation from the city council visited a number of American cities to learn how to effectively deal with petty crime amongst youth, such as graffiti.

The American model is for some administrators still too standard and directional. In the 90's, American society was confronted with a wave of privatised child punishment camps that even proved to be profitable. Large groups of children were placed in cheap barracks and unemployed people paid 6 dollars to act as guardians. One of these reform camps, the Tallulah jail in Louisiana, set up in 1994, has since then built up an extremely questionable reputation. A recently published report from the Ministry of Justice concludes that the camp generates violence. Violent offences – amongst the children themselves and between children and guardians – are worrying: on average 30 children per month are taken to hospital with major injuries. The children who leave Tallulah are in fact so traumatised that they lose the ability to function normally in society, forever.

The suppression of graffiti is also a downright attack on the biggest youth movement the world has ever known. The majority of graffers are between the ages of ten and eighteen and in Rotterdam alone there are an estimated ten thousand of them. The unstoppable increase of graffiti and the mass participation of children in this phenomenon should provoke us to think about the issue. This, without a doubt, is the loudest multicultural scream ever, where attention, respect and reflection is necessary, and places all discussions on youth criminality in another light.

If Pietje Bell were to live in Rotterdam today, he would grow dope, steal mobile phones and write on walls – besides, mischief is eternal. That is why I am delighted with the Pietje Bell sculpture; not as a nostalgic homage for the Rotterdam of yesteryear, but as a monument for all the anonymous children, whose loud voices reverberate through the city, but are never heard.