

Looking for Wopko Jensma

Artist, poet, schizophrenic and 'first South African' Wopko Jensma disappeared without trace in 1993. **Michael Gardiner** reports on a new initiative to revive his extraordinary creations

"I don't want to become a campus guru." This in response to my request to Wopko Jensma for permission to photocopy his poems for my students, necessary because his published work had been allowed to go out of print. We were listening to the jazz guitar of Herb Ellis, Jensma having asked me to take off the inferior music of Kenny Burrell.

The smoke from his zol, made of Yellow Pages paper and Boxer tobacco, never rose above waist height. We sat with our heads just above the line of acrid, grey strands. Smoking and coffee were the chief delights of Jensma's existence in the Salvation Army Men's Home, where he had taken shelter from the extremes of his thoroughly disabling schizophrenia.

This was in 1987, 10 years after his last publication, and at one end of his search for sanctuary in mental homes and other places of refuge in all the main cities of South Africa.

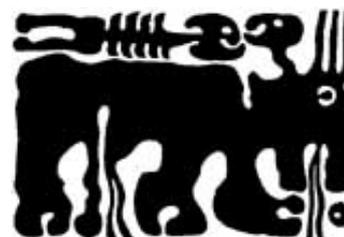
He left his family in 1969. He, his wife and children had attempted to live together in Botswana where they went after a difficult time in Swaziland. South Africa would have prosecuted him and deported his wife and children because of the mixed-race marriage. Finally, Lydia and her children went from Botswana to Manzini, and Jensma arrived alone in Pretoria.

Though born a white Afrikaner in the Cape, Jensma described his birth as having occurred on July 26 1939 in four different places: Ventersdorp, Sophiatown, District Six and Welkom. The same poem lists his death 60 years later in four equally disparate places: the Costa do Sol, the Kalahari, the "grasslands" and "in a situation" (*Spanner in the What? Works*, 1975).

South African culture has experienced the multiple in individuals before, but Jensma's exploded self sought to incorporate the whole country in a single



Multiple personality: Wopko Jensma was born a white Afrikaner in the Cape, but he described his birth as having occurred on the same day (July 26 1939) in four different places: Ventersdorp, Sophiatown, District Six and Welkom



The poet's art: Wopko Jensma used the resources of the avant-garde, jazz and the interplay of languages in Southern Africa in his poetry and graphic works



Speaking out: A Wopko Jensma design as the masthead for the May 1975 edition of *Snarl*

RELATED ARTICLES

[Revolution in a shopping mall](#)

Art dealer Warren Siebrits exhibited

being, despite the shattering effects of apartheid. There are undoubted family and individual origins to his schizophrenia. What he did while he could work creatively was to use the resources of the European avant-garde, African and South African jazz plus the interplay of languages in Southern Africa to trace the contours of pain in his poetry and graphic works.

work by down-and-out radical
Wopko Jensma in the unlikely
location of a Jo'burg mall
[19/07/96]

CYBERSPACE

UCT Poetry Web

A page of Jensma's poetry and
related criticism on the poetry site
edited by Peter Horn

My Hands

my hands are dead turned yellow

i stand alone
alone at the end of the road
my open hands
open at your door

my skull explodes
explodes with hands and all
my skull
with my hands inside

once my hands were birds singing
— *Sing for Our Execution*, 1973

Jensma claimed kinship, through schizophrenia, with Beethoven, Gauguin and Baudelaire, as well as with Can Themba, Nat Nakasa, Eugene Marais, Dumile, Kippie Moeketsi and Harold Rubin (*Klop en vir Julle Sal Toegemaak Word [Knock and It Shall Be Closed unto You]*, 1977). The key tension in this assembly is the struggle with form and coherence. One of the effects of schizophrenia, according to Jean Baudrillard, is the inability to filter the sensations which come at one, so that one becomes "an obscene prey to the world's obscenity".

When I visited Jensma at the Salvation Army Men's Home in Simmonds Street, Johannesburg, I understood how, once in one's cubicle amid other unwashed, down-and-out men, it could prove difficult if not impossible to leave such a place, enclosed as one is in that relatively stable and simplified society, where access to fresh instant coffee is a significant event.

As a recipient of a state pension for the permanently disabled - a pension which the home drew on his behalf and gave him credit at its tuckshop - Jensma had ceased to produce both the poetry and the graphics for which he is so respected. Earlier and extensive support from his friends in Pretoria, Cape Town and Johannesburg had dwindled, and he spent his day on the streets, or in the Carlton Centre for warmth, scrutinising scraps of paper and conversing in a loosely associative manner, unable to write or draw.

This identity as a tramp, derelict and painfully lost soul meant, ironically, that far from being born in four different places or dying in four distinct

situations, he was living nowhere, doing nothing and without any distinctness at all.

So when his daughters and son contacted me in 1989 and came to see him at the home, a 20-year gap had to be leaped by both them and him. Though there was further contact between the children and their father, he chose to remain where he was in the shelter of a racially exclusive environment rather than live with his children in Johannesburg or back in Swaziland.

Mafika Gwala's comments, made in 1988, about an earlier encounter are germane: "Wopko Jensma. For a long time I thought he was a black. ... So when I met Wopko one evening, edged against his withdrawal, I could think of only one thing: his white world was killing him, as if out to destroy him. Perhaps he had refused for too long to be the white he was expected to be" (*Matatu* 3/4:2).

When Jensma's first large collection of poetry and woodcuts, *Sing for Our Execution*, appeared in 1973, Mary Morison Webster wrote in the *Sunday Times*: "The reader's initial and, indeed, lasting impression is that Jensma is an African - possibly of Sophiatown. Use of words and phrases nevertheless seems, at times, that of an American Negro rather than of a man from the Transvaal.

"Surprisingly, it turns out that this versatile poet (he writes with equal facility in both official White languages) is a European in his mid-thirties (son of a Dutch father and an Afrikaans mother) who has so closely identified himself with the African and his cause that he thinks and feels as a Black man."

Well now. Others believe that Jensma tried to have himself classified black African, in terms of apartheid's racial legislation. Even in Botswana - where he taught at Patrick van Rensburg's school and worked for the Botswana Information Ministry - he found inadvertent racialism:

knockin yo do a day:
ukhona u Thandiwe?
an really dis reply:
"yea boss, she's hea"
a' keep forgettin ma skin
it's ma curse
cause a' lost a white swing
— from *Once and Now*, in *Ophir* 12, 1970

It was the poems which Jensma sent, first to Phil du Plessis's student magazine *Wurm*, and then to *Ophir*, edited by Walter Saunders and Peter Horn, in the late 1960s which made South Africans aware of his poetic presence:

Blues 2

! batter a fences down
enter, i coshed em down, an out
cup my head in ya bloodbeat
! this fence aint no more
baby-black ya eyes a croon
i eat ya, a lassy streak, deep
? fence don't shadow me
aint we nobodys business?
nobody knows the trouble i see
? fence ya aint killin me
days's a down an out, yea
zombies coon my creoletown
! fence, buzz off in a blue
aint ya business daddy-o? wha
ya aint fooling me no more
! batter a fences down
- *Ophir* 2, 1967

That was Jensma's declarative presence. What followed were over 70 poems between 1967 and 1976 published in *Ophir* alone, poems which generated awe and astonishment, as well as affection from contemporaries like Sheila Fugard, Mafika Gwala and Nkathazo kaMnyayiza. Gwala wrote to Walter Saunders in 1975: "Since this world's been sown/Ghetto cats dig Wopko Jensma.' From a poem I did five months back."

As co-editor of *Ophir*, Peter Horn was so impressed by the quality of the poetry that Jensma continued to submit that he proposed a special issue which emerged in 1971 with 10 poems, entitled *Sing for Our Execution*. Later, Horn published a critical article on the poetry of Jensma in *Quarry '77* (Donker), raising the issue of Jensma's so-called attempts to speak on behalf of others. He quoted Cherry Clayton: "The consciousness of [Jensma's] poetry is a suffering, uttering Black organism ... His poetry is almost pure outcry, as if the very earth were black, weeping and protesting when trodden on. It is an amazing feat of identification, achieved instinctively rather than as a calculated poetic technique." (*Snarl* 1, 1975)

Horn argued that this view totally misrepresents Jensma's poetry: "Wopko's identification with the oppressed is not a 'feat': he is forced into it by the circumstances of his life and by the make-up of his society. He does not speak the language of the discarded, rejected and oppressed because of a pretended change of skin pigmentation, but because he has experienced being discarded, rejected and oppressed ... Wopko Jensma's outcry articulates the misery of those who are by and large bereft of speech. But it is not simply *somebody else's* inarticulateness, not simply that of the black or 'coloured' masses: it is his own inarticulateness struggling towards speech."

Jensma's response to receiving a draft copy of this article is significant: "Received Peter's review on

Thursday ... Went to the hotel round the corner from the PO [post office] to read it and, sad to say, I cried."

In 1972, Jensma held an exhibition of graphics, entitled *Wail for the Beast*, at Gallery Y. Woodcuts from this show were incorporated into the 1973 *Ophir/Ravan* collection of 41 poems, *Sing for Our Execution*. This publication, and those which followed it, reflected his many talents, and this one in particular created sufficient interest for at least 13 newspapers and journals to print reviews, often accompanied by reproductions of woodcuts from the collection.

Writing in *Rapport*, Stephen Gray said: "It is now time to assert clearly that Wopko Jensma is as important a creative artist as anyone produced by South Africa. His book is not only a collection: it is a phenomenon. It stands at the centre of South African life."

One ED of the *Eastern Province Herald* showed somewhat less grasp of the situation: "No one could be as sour, tough, bitter and rough as Wopko Jensma makes himself out, unless Mr Jensma happens to be a green marulu plum. One cannot doubt the intensity of the bitterness nor its all too probable justification. No doubt any sufferings or humiliation that Baudelaire or TS Eliot underwent were, in comparison with those known or observed among his own people by Mr Jensma, trifles."

Whereas Lionel Abrahams, in the *Rand Daily Mail*, observed: "At a time when people are more than ever aware of their colour, even in the arts, Wopko Jensma is the only South African artist in any medium who has transcended the barriers. His work is neither English nor Afrikaans, Black nor White."

Oggendblad said: "To characterise this collection in a brief review is almost impossible. The motives and techniques vary too much; the world from which the poetry emerges is sometimes too strange for the white reader. But one can say this: these are verses of our time, these are verses of southern Africa - not merely poetry for white or black."

It is Peter Wilhelm's insights which take us to the heart of the matter: "This is the clue to Jensma. He stays together, in shape, alchemically combining enormously diverse cultures and experiences. He is a terrifying, new sort of human. He is the first South African."

Jensma could not "stay together". He moved from job to job and city to city. After a productive sojourn in Durban in 1975, he returned to Johannesburg to put together his final published

collection, *i must show you my clippings* (1977), two years after *Where White Is the Colour/Where Black Is the Number* had been banned.

All this serves to show that when Jensma was writing and painting/drawing (he had had 24 exhibitions of his work by April 1973, according to a report in *Oggendblad*), he excited the interest of poets, editors, gallery owners (such as Wolf Weinek and Harold Jeppe), critics and a broad base of those for whom the arts are important.

But he built no structures, he established no institutions, he created no stable circle of friends and admirers. In this respect, he was different from his influential contemporaries such as Bill Ainslie, Barney Simon and Lionel Abrahams. Even the community of Afrikaans writers, who diligently promote each other's work, rarely mention Jensma in their accounts of cultural history.

In this respect, Jensma has received very different treatment from the adulation with which every Breyten Breytenbach production is received. Both these poets/artists were born in the same year of Cape Afrikaner families. Both studied art at university and the marriage of each violated South African law, compelling an exile. Whereas Breytenbach repudiates, rejoins, is repudiated by and then welcomed back into his language community, Jensma remains thoroughly outside that social fraction of South African society which still controls the means of production, which generates wealth and shapes reality according to its notions of what is fit and proper.

Jensma's experience of life as reflected in his work continues to speak to the reality of the majority of South Africans. As recent analyses of African cities show, conventional forms of bureaucracy, administration and control reach or are sought by about only one-quarter of an urban population. The majority live within networks of informal and even more interstitial relations which are beyond conventional modes of organisation and hence description. These relations shift and slide, are invisible to outsiders, and create multiple opportunities for border crossings and hybridity in social relations, "where the existence of social and cultural distinctions becomes increasingly an occasion for mixture". And, as AbdouMalik Simone further points out, in this complicity of social differences, all aspects of social life can be negotiated.

Al Hajj Malik al Shabazz

yebo, my seur shepp
let'm rain forest in here
ek sê fokoll nou

amagugu: djy, ek't djou gavasjeet
kom hienatoe. lvster fvn-

die singsong issie wat djy gadenk

dis goodluck vi djou
djy trust my mossie, nè
(my ousie dans majuba-
mntanami nè, watchaai deng!)

met my tickeyline
in long black machava

dawn'f freedom-mister x
djy'sie spike sonner 'n pas-
die states se banana, se bandana

ek kannie nounie remember
hoeie shakes my ruk
my baas, slaatom diékant toe

By 1989 Jensma's publishers took to sending me his post. Some time after that I discovered that he had disappeared from the home.

At some point in 1993, he was taken to the Johannesburg General hospital for his weekly treatment. When the Salvation Army driver came to fetch him, he was nowhere to be found. I established that his pension was last drawn in August 1993. The next year, the Salvation Army Men's Home burned to the ground. People who knew Jensma were contacted in all the major centres, the Salvation Army checked all its shelters and attempts were made to determine whether he had entered a mental home in Pretoria. All efforts failed to produce any trace of him.

In July 1996, the *Mail & Guardian* published a report, containing some factual errors, about Jensma. This created much excitement that perhaps some sign of him had been discovered, but there was no further information forthcoming.

In May 1999, friends of Jensma - Colin Smuts, Walter Saunders, Wolf Weinek and myself — met with Jensma's two daughters to discuss the establishment of a Wopko Jensma trust. The son, also called Wopko, had died two years ago. It was agreed to set up such a trust into which could go the few remaining royalties from the sale of his poetry collections, donations as well as the ongoing income from international anthologies and translations of his work continue to earn.

The purpose of the trust is to publicise the present situation (and this article is part of that effort), to republish his poetical works, to protect his interests and to support his family.