



date today is 5 april 1975 I live  
at 23 mountain drive derdepoort  
phone number: 821-646, post box 26285  
i still find myself in a situation

i possess a typewriter and paper  
i possess tools to profess I am artist  
i possess books, clothes to dress  
my flesh; my fingerprint of identity  
i do not possess this land, a car  
much cash or other valuables



Fragment 'Spanner in the what? Works' from *I must show you my clippings* 1977  
Front cover *Untitled (Supplement to Farme...)* Collage 247X165mm

Wopko Jensma circa 1972 Photo Weinek archives

## Wopko Jensma: Possessing tools/professing artistry

Almost 25 years after Steven Sack included Wopko Jensma in his pioneering exhibition, *The Neglected Tradition: Towards A New History of South African Art* at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 1988, and despite numerous literary accolades for Jensma's poetry over the years, he is still neglected as a fine artist in the local art scene.

Many of the neglected, mainly black artists included in the Sack exhibition have subsequently been honoured with art awards, retrospective exhibitions, and publications, notably Dumile Feni, Jackson Hlungwane, Noria Mabaso, Ernest Mancoba, Pat Mautloa, Azaria Mbatha, Gladys Mgudlandlu, Tommy Motswai, John Muafangejo, Bonnie Ntshalithsahli, George Pemba, and especially Gerard Sekoto. No such accolades for Wopko Jensma, though.

On the literary front Jensma fared better: he published four highly acclaimed poetry anthologies, one of which, *where white is the colour, where black is the number* (1974) was banned under the apartheid regime. Peter Horn wrote a seminal article about Jensma's poetry, "The psychological pauperization of man in our society" in the literary journal, *Quarry '77* that is as relevant today as when he first published it. Jensma received the English Academy award for creative work in 1983 and his poetry has since been included in anthologies of South African poetry. Ashraf Jamal recently called Jensma the prototypical syncretist in his book *Predicaments of Culture in South Africa* (2005). Leti Kleyn published no fewer than three articles on Jensma's poetry and his involvement in the literary scene in South Africa. Stephen Gray and Michael Gardiner often write about Jensma's poetry. Gray calls him the first multilingual poet, "a radio simultaneously tuned in on all the frequencies", long before the concept of multilingualism gained currency in language policy debates. It was Gardiner, however, in curating an exhibition entitled *South African Literary Journals, 1956 – 1978*, who drew attention to the interplay between Jensma's poetry and his art. The connection was, sadly, not rigorously pursued in the catalogue, or in the works on display at that exhibition. In, what Stephen Gray considers to be his best poem, 'Spanner in the what? Works' (pp6-7, *I must show you my clippings*, 1977), Jensma writes: "i possess a typewriter and paper/i possess tools to profess I am an artist".

Jensma's poetry and art seem to be as fragmented as his life. (Ayub Sheik (2002), for example, admits to being able only to compile 'notes' towards a Jensma biography; Leti Kleyn's indefatigably rigorous research (2010) towards a Jensma biography is, according to her, a work still in progress.) In one letter to Weinek, Jensma likens himself to Charles Baudelaire, emphasizing the asocial and fragmented condition of his urban existence. Peter Wilhelm refers to Jensma's multiple selves as "many entities in one shape ... staying together, alchemically combining enormous diverse cultures and experiences. He is a terrifying new sort of person." Sheila Roberts concurs, prophesizing at the time that Jensma is "the first wholly integrated South African". The aim of this exhibition is to equate this unparalleled status of being the first South African, with his art.

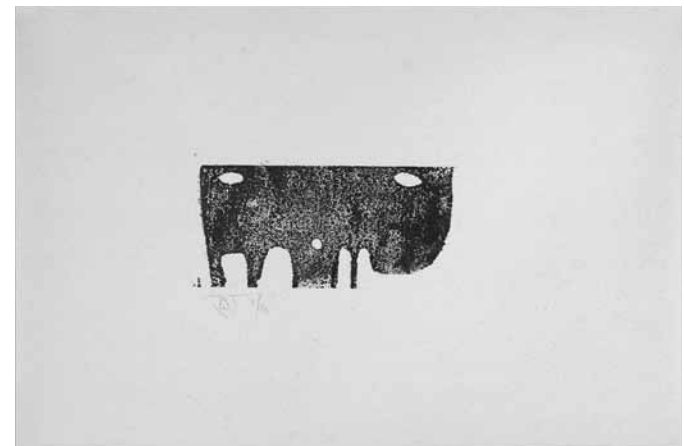
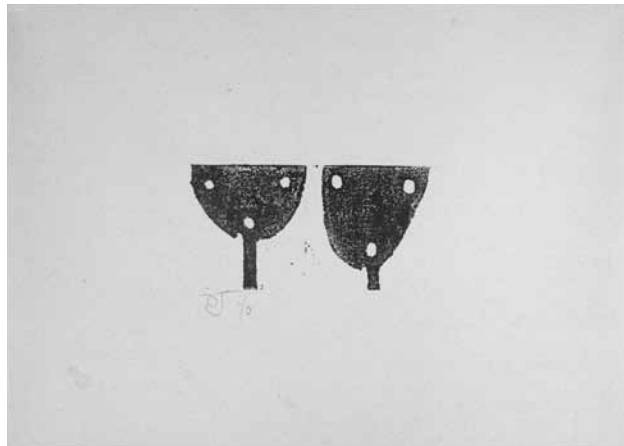
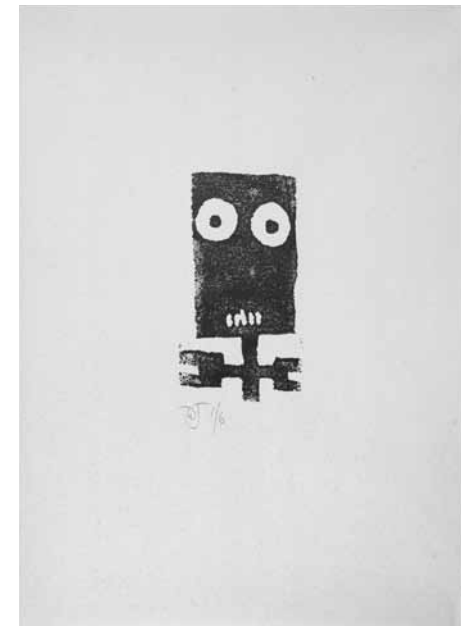
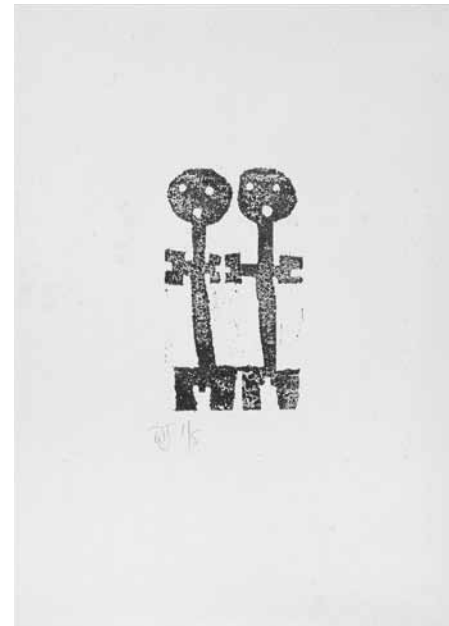
Today, the 'one shape', or style of Jensma's art works is instantaneously recognizable, but in many different forms. These forms are, as Wilhelm continues in his statement, "like strange mind things, small creatures creeping off the page and settling in your head and sit there." Jensma thus traverses the verbal and the visual in his art, equally dexterous as, and comparable to William Burroughs' famous cut-ups, cut-ins, and cut-outs. Jensma's art starts with the verbal poem and morphs into a visual art work. His highly evocative poems, conjuring very vivid imagery, often have art as subject matter, such as 'Lo Lul #4' (p25), and 'Portrait of the artist' (p72) from the anthology, *Sing for our execution* (1973); 'riff IV' (p42) from *where white is the colour, where black is the number* (1974); and 'Chant of praise # IX for the Idi Amin Dada' (p55), 'The corn awaits us, the blackbirds' (p62), and 'The ceiling just caved in today' (p71) from *I must show you my clippings* (1977). In these poems he invokes those artists - Vincent van Gogh, Piet Mondrian, Julian Motau, Dumile Feni, Kurt Schwitters, Jean Arp, Marcel Duchamp, Theo van Doesburg, Francis Picabia, and Tristan Tzara - who have shaped or influenced his thinking and his practice.

His poems take on various shapes, qualifying them as 'visual' or concrete poetry, such as 'Lopsided circle' (p10) in the shape of a giant letter C, and 'Sing a soul of sixpence' (p29) (in which the title and the poem form a big number 5) in *Sing for our execution*, and 'Varkore' (p37) (evoking the shape of a sow's ears) and 'Knediep in the kak' (p37) in *I must show you my clippings*.

In many instances, Jensma's poems are accompanied by visual images of his own art works. One could argue that they purportedly serve as 'illustrations' of the poems, but they could well have other functions. For example, reproductions of twelve of Jensma's woodcuts are interleaved with the poems in *Sing for our execution* (1973). (The first version of *Sing for our execution* (1971, Ophir Publications, with 10 poems, not 40 as in the case of the 1973 version) only has a Jensma woodcut on the cover, but printed upside down). The woodcuts are 'poems' in their own right, presented autonomously in the anthology, standing on their own, not facing any one of the poems. The intention to offer the visual as poetry is also evident from 'Chant of praise # V for the Idi Amin Dada': the 'poem' is literally an image of one of his woodcuts. The visual is the verbal in this case.

In addition, the repetition in some of Jensma's poems has a strong visual quality, such as the poem in which each line starts with "Is dit jy wat..." (p56, *where white is the colour, where black is the number*), forming a flag-like shape flying on a pole. Jensma's arbitrary use of capital letters has an equally visual effect, such as in the poem, 'SuB/BurB/Bia' (p40, *I must show you my clippings*), in which the text of the poem becomes visual texture.

The four published poetry anthologies bring his poems together, but they also constitute a portfolio of his art. One is often treated to collages of the verbal and the visual in these publications, Jensma is a veritable, latter day Cubist artist in this regard. One gets to see images of art works where the verbal is clearly emphasized in discernible bits of sentences, clauses and phrases (the best example arguably the "where white is the colour where black is the number" refrain in at least two poems



Left to right, top to bottom  
*Untitled* Block prints in single colour 1/5, 1/6, 1/5, 1/6, 1/6, 1/6 510X364mm each

(p11 & pp24-25) in the anthology with the same title). One gets to see collages in which Jensma cut out newspaper articles in his inimitable amorphous shapes. One gets to see images of his pen and his graphite drawings. (Many of his letters to friends include large, elaborate drawings.) One gets to see a quasi-performance captured in a series of well-known photographs of Jensma approaching a chair on the beach, climbing over it and disappearing over the dunes and into the sea.

A further manifestation of the typographical nature of his art (first observed by Jean Marquard in a review in 1977) can be found in the many book covers he designed for his friends, such as the ones for Phil du Plessis' book, *Geskrifte om 'n houtgesig* (1971), Eva Royston's *One hundred and three poems* (1973), Oswald Mtshali's *Sounds of the Cowhide Drum* (1971), Sheila Fugard's *Threshold* (1975), Siphon Sepamla's *Hurry up to it* (1975) and John Miles' *Liefs nie op straat nie* (1970). ("Do you have a Wopko Jensma cover?" was the satirical opening line at many literary parties of the time.) In addition, Jensma designed numerous covers for literary magazines such as *Ophir* #16 (1971), *Contrast* #26 (1971), *Snarl* #6 (1977), and *IZWI* #2. Incidentally, *IZWI* #9 (April 1973) included a photolithographic reproduction of his famous *Don Quixote in Africa* drawing, as well as a poster, *Swart Gevaar*, folded and stapled in the back of the magazine. F.L. Alexander's seminal *South African Graphic Art and its Techniques* (1974) also sports a large-scale reproduction of a Jensma woodcut on its cover. The relatively unknown series of African Fables published in *English in Africa* in the early 1970s are also illustrated with his woodcuts.

Many interpretations have been offered in the past about his work. First and foremost, Jensma was associated with the trend in art in the sixties with regard to the so-called mysticism of Africa, pioneered by such artists as Cecil Skotnes and Alexis Preller. Richard Cheales, for example, describes Jensma as attempting "to 'think' as would an African who has power, with paint, to evolve colour-poems of praise for his tribal land and life". Such lyricism would make Jensma a modern day Bushman artist, or an imbongi or praise poet. It is not difficult to identify the origins of such an interpretation. Jensma was associated with Egon Guenther's Amadlozi Group, with members such as Guiseppe Cattaneo, Sydney Kumalo, Cecily Sash, Cecil Skotnes, and Eduardo Villa, and Guenther printed many of Jensma's woodcuts. Recently, Roger van Wyk invokes interpretation when he writes about Jensma's "affinity to African culture and participation in traditional rituals [which] helped nurture an embodied syncretism that remains apparent in [Jensma's] animist art". (*Visual Century*, Volume 3, 2011).

Secondly, Jensma was considered to provide, through his art, deep psychological insight into the human psyche. Chris van Wyk wrote in 1973 about Jensma's contorted motifs or "beasts" as symbolizing the universal tormented human psyche. Jacques Lacan's psycho-analytical approach to the (visual) text could be in this regard an apt theoretical framework for such an interpretation. Such an interpretation captures political overtones of people being turned into animals because of oppression. Intersecting with this is Sheila Robert's intimation of a psycho-sexual reading of his art in her short story,

based on Jensma's brief sojourn in Botswana, "Mbiti Herself", included in her collection, *This Time of Year and other stories* (1983).

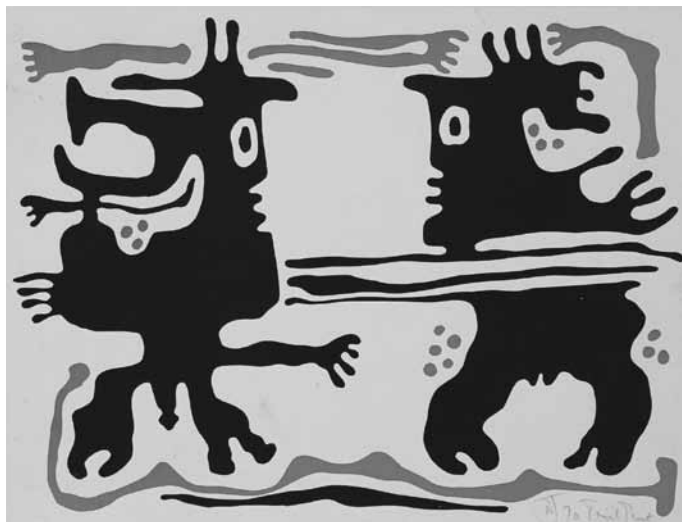
Thirdly, the art world looks at Jensma as perhaps one of the first conceptual artists of this country, preceding such conceptual artists as Willem Boshoff, Michael Goldberg and Claude van Lingen. Aligned with this conceptual streak is another interpretation, namely that nowadays, Jensma is considered by Van Wyk to be a neo-Dada artist, included in the seminal *Dada South?* exhibition at Iziko in 2010. Van Wyk mentions in his Chapter on 'Art, subversion and the quest for freedoms' (*Visual Century*, Volume 3, 2011) the fact that Jensma was strongly influenced by Dada artist, Hans Arp. If one takes his famous poem, 'Idi Amin Dada' in consideration, as well as integrates his verbal output with his visual art, there is a case to be made for such a position.

*Possessing tools/professing artistry* is a tribute to the way in which Wopko Jensma explored the different forms – "many entities in one shape" – in various and diverse mediums, in bright and unusual colours and colour combinations, not only in the familiar black and white with which many people associate his art. He was a contemporary artist in the socially engaged art of the 1970s.

Wopko Jensma studied art at the University of Pretoria towards a BA Fine Arts degree (1961 – 1964), as well as at the University of Potchefstroom towards a Teacher's Diploma. He taught at Swaneng Hill School in Botswana in 1969, and aspired to open his own art school, as he related in letters to Wolf and Gundi Weinek. His first exhibition was organized by a friend, Jonathan Paton in his house in Parkwood. Jensma exhibited regularly in the late-1960s and throughout the 1970s: at the South African Association of Art (SAAA) in March 1968, at the Lidchi Art Gallery in November 1968, and again at the same gallery in February 1969 and in May 1969. He also exhibited at the Walsh Marais Art Gallery in Durban and at Gallery International in Cape Town in 1969. In 1971 he showed at numerous galleries: Gallery d'Art (February), the SAAA (March), Natal Society of Art (NSA), Durban (March), Gallery 101 (April), SAAA in August and again at the NSA in November 1971. In addition Jensma exhibited abroad in New York and in Oxford. His relationship with Wolf Weinek's Gallery Y in Hillbrow started in 1972 with his first exhibition. In April 1974 he showed again at the SAAA in Pretoria, and in May 1975 again at the NSA, Durban. In 1976 he was back at Gallery Y in July, and he showed for the first time at Hoffer Art Gallery, Pretoria in August 1976. In 1979 Jensma was included in the South African Printmakers exhibition at the South African National Gallery, Cape Town. In 1980 he exhibited at Gallery Y again. In 1996 Metroplex showed one print in a display window of a shop in a Rosebank shopping mall, and in 2012 The Maker in Parkwood exhibited some of his works.

Wilhelm van Rensburg

Research Fellow, Visual Identities in Art and Design (VIAD) Research Centre, Faculty of Art, Design and Architecture (FADA), University of Johannesburg (UJ)



Untitled 1970 Screenprint Trial print 565X647mm (Private collection)  
Wopko Jensma circa 1976 Photo Weinek archives

A tender touch  
for Wopko

I

The last lunch we enjoyed with Wopko Jensma at our home in Melville was in 1988. It was shortly before the opening of *The neglected tradition* exhibition at the Johannesburg Art Gallery. For the exhibition Steven Sack, who curated the show, had selected one of Wopko's pieces from our collection. I knew Wopko from his student days when he attended my tutorials in the Department of Afrikaans/Nederlands at the University of Pretoria. We were old friends and after lunch we agreed to meet at the opening.

With hindsight, on the day of the lunch Wopko came to say good bye. He brought me a gift wrapped in a piece of newspaper. In his quiet self-effacing manner he said it was from Tutankhamen's grave. (I cherish this turquoise 'amulet' and still carry it in my handbag.) Wopko did not turn up at the opening. Some months later the Salvation Army Home where he had lodged, burnt down and he vanished.

II

Roundabout 1970 my ex-husband John Miles chose as an illustration for the jacket of his debut book of short stories *Liefs nie op straat nie* a serigraph by Wopko. John's choice underscored the mood of his short stories and Daantjie Saayman, the maverick publisher of Buren Publishing House, sidestepped the board of censors when he very discreetly 'shrunk' the generously endowed genital of the male figure. Nonetheless Wopko's powerful image forfeited nothing of its expressiveness, despite Daantjie's slight alteration and the reduced format to suit Buren's pocket size publication. Thirteen years later Tafelberg Publishers ran a soft cover reprint and still the image compels.

John chose an unusual subject from Wopko's body of work: the portrayal of a couple. Single figures, resembling enigmatic individuals or animals readily feature in his work but he hardly ever renders 'double portraits' like the *Liefs nie op straat nie* one. Another representation of a couple by Wopko that comes to mind is from his book of poems *Sing for our execution*. Yet in that case, the two figures merge and their composure is in stark contrast to the frenetic yearning for each other of the *Liefs nie op straat nie* couple.

Wopko was thoroughly familiar with the ideal proportions of the human body in Western art. Yet he chose the African norm. Hence the emphasis is on the head carried on a squat and shorter abdomen. Accordingly his *Liefs nie op straat nie* couple is rooted in Africa.

III

For many years the movements – let me call it dance – of the *Liefs nie op straat nie* couple mesmerized me. It hung on the wall in the room where we worked and slept. Later we replaced it and eventually circumstances at home also changed...

Recently on reading Tom Lubbrock's discussion of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam* in *The Independent* the penny dropped. Then I realised what had intrigued me for all these years about Wopko's piece. It is its link with Michelangelo's God and Adam. Yet unlike Michelangelo's omnipotent God, the sole source of life that is to bring Adam to life, Wopko's understanding differs. He shows two human beings: a man and a woman. Jointly they endlessly busy themselves in an ongoing attempt to reach each other and impart their tender human touch.

Elza Miles  
23 May 2007, Prince Albert



Were it not for the keepers of the flame like Michael Gardiner, Warren Siebrits and Leti Kleyn, as well as the late bookseller Wolf Weinek and his widow Gundi – dedicatees of a notorious poem of his called 'Chant of Praise for Idi Amin Dada' – what was left of the reputation of a prolific and well-noted artist and writer like Wopko Pieter Jensma would have waned, just as in real life he saw to it that he would disappear. The rumour is that finally he lost his head by a ritual beheading, yet where the severed parts of his tormented body may have come to rest to this day remains a mystery.

His opus has largely slipped by the record-keepers, too. Although in his published work he pioneered the mixing of South African languages, lowering the high-falutin gleefully into slang, none of his innovative verse is quoted from in Oxford's *Dictionary of South African English on Historical Principles* of 1996, nor does Louis Molamu capture any of it in his *Tsotsi-taal: A Dictionary and the Language of Sophiatown*, published by UNISA in 2003, even though he lists over two hundred sources; there is no Jensma among them. While at the height of his fame in the late 1960s into the 70s, he was more than once described as 'the first South African poet', as we shall see, and accepted as a leading spokesperson for the new generation of post-war verse, nor is he included in Simon Gikandi's *Routledge Encyclopedia of African Literature* of 2009.

None the less, in the recent *Columbia Guide to South African Literature in English since 1945* (2011) his poetry does receive an entry, tactfully and accurately being commended for its use of 'colloquial and fractured speech to resist the grammar of modern, middle-class existence' (see page 112). And as the following recollection should establish once and for all, there are memories and traces of this dismembered Jensma everywhere in the current literary scene, bloodspattered as may be, but persistently recurring. For example, there is Charl Blignaut in the *Mail & Guardian* of 19 July, 1996, puzzling over an exhibition of Jensma's surviving woodblock prints; Gardiner covering two pages in the same (on 10 March, 2000) to spur a revival of interest and to query his whereabouts; then out of the blue in *Beeld* (on 16 February, 2008) one Andries Bezuidenhout reprints part of the poem 'Joburg Spiritual' of 1968, which was Jensma's signature piece, in order to inspire imitators and collectors.

His work as a poet began to appear most notably in *Ophir*, the often hand-printed pamphlet edited by Walter Saunders and Peter Horn from addresses in Hatfield and Brooklyn, Pretoria. These items he submitted while he was mainly still resident in post-independent Botswana. Particularly attracted by the blends of slap Boeretaal and Hotnotstaal poets like Phil du Plessis, Jeanne Goosen and later Wilma Stockenström were pioneering, and the use of common suburban brogue by Sheila Roberts, Jensma followed suit, contributing poems which were so deeply into the vernacular that more than once *Ophir* had to supply inserts with translations into internationally



Untitled Woodcut 7/8 312X230mm

Previous page *Birth* 1975 Monotype and gouache 574X770mm



comprehensible English, if only for the sake of their subscribers and contributors abroad. Thus 'Sondagoggend Tien-Dertig', which originally appeared on page 55 of *Ophir* Number 14 of September, 1971, carried a rendering into jokey English by the poet himself as 'Sunday Morning Ten-Thirty'. There 'Elder Herklaas vanner Merwe coughs... ', and 'mourits pomp die orel vol windgat' is rendered as 'mourits [surely Moritz or Morris] pumps the organ full of windbag'!

When ten poems such as these were collected up into his first solo publication as an *Ophir* supplement called *Sing for Our Execution* in 1971, these were then elaborated into his first volume together with a dozen of his black on white graphics interleaved on art paper, published by Ravan Press two years later.

The friends he formed in Johannesburg were many, and included two general practitioners, both running private lives as avant-garde poets in Afrikaans – Phil du Plessis and Casper Schmidt. For a period they would keep Jensma fed, tranquillised and productive. Both had transferred from Pretoria and the last numbers of the *Wurm* journal of the 1960s to occupy Sir George Farrar's palatial residence overlooking Arthur Block Park, on the Amalgam edge of Johannesburg's downtrodden but very mixed-race Mayfair district. As the Crown Mines resident mine-doctor, Du Plessis had ample living room for Schmidt to set up the silkscreen apparatus for Jensma, supplying inks and paper for a home industry in limited and signed editions and graphics to ensue, while the adjacent cottage was used as a roneo and collating headquarters of the new journal, *IZWI / VOICE / STEM*. Schmidt duly provided the cover for Du Plessis's new venture on 1 October, 1971, and Jensma serigraphed the second of 1 December, 1971, from his own artwork.

Inevitably it was the local Special Branch which by mid-1973 had seen to the disbanding of Jensma's Crown Mines sanctuary, with Schmidt taking off for the safety of a practice in New York City where in due course he died of AIDS, while Du Plessis fled, taking refuge in remotest Lüderitz of the South West Africa that was, never to return to the Witwatersrand. Further editorial meetings there were to be concerned more with the discovery of Ovambo writing. But before the dispersal, for Number 19 of April Fool's Day, 1973, Jensma did manage to print out and sign 250 copies of his insert, 'Don Quixote in Africa', which was included at no extra charge and was a boisterous version of my poem 'Don Quixote in Johannesburg.'

Full of photographic cut-ups, Jensma's third and last volume of June, 1977, acted as a scrapbook of his whole career, including many cuttings of newsprint referring from market prices to the war in Angola. The volume opens with the crucial Jensma poem: 'I was born 26 July 1939 in ventersdorp / I found myself in a situation' (page 6) – although he was actually born in Middelburg, Cape, of Dutch-Afrikaans farming folk. Later in the volume the 'situation' becomes 'Unintelligible cacophonous montages, it's dada', committed by 'The schizophrenic [who] splits itself [i.e. himself]' (page 49). Ominously the message is a repeated 'it's gettin late' (page 31), the phrase the *Ophir*

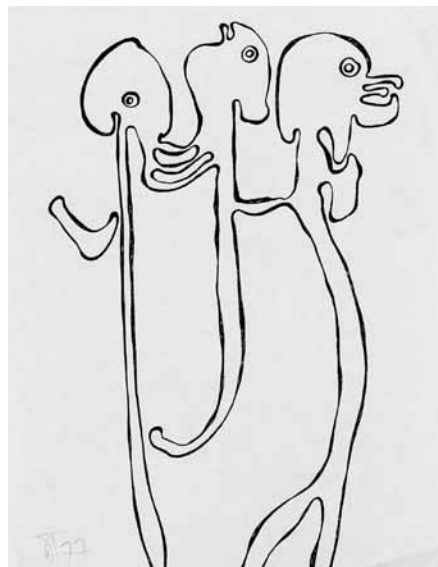
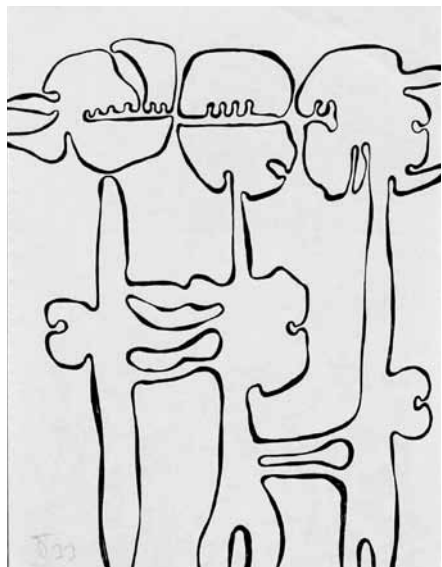
editors had used as the title of the selection of the best of their journal's pages in facsimile, taken from an earlier Jensma layout.

Jensma's reputation was most firmly established with the publication of the three volumes of poetry, each with his own artwork, published in quick succession. The first of these was *Sing for Our Execution*, which Ravan Press released on 29 May, 1973, with a limited edition of 200 of the same, numbered and autographed with the woodcuts printed on handmade paper, at R5.00 each. By December, 1974, the same team had his *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* out, billed as conceived, typeset and designed by Jensma. Dedicated to Saunders of *Ophir* and garlanded with shouts from the previous volume, it including Peter Wilhelm's affirmation from *To the Point* of 30 June, 1973 ('He is a terrifying, new sort of human. He is the first South African').

By winter, 1977, the third of these volumes was out, *I Must Show You My Clippings*, described merely as 'poems and graphics' by Wopko Jensma, although many other talents were involved. This sold in soft cover at R4.50 a copy. It was issued by Ravan again as an act of daring, considering the retaliation the second volume had brought upon them (suppression of the book; mock-trials; firebombing of Diakonia House; the banning of the publisher Peter Randall himself, and so on).

But the full story of the dramatic events of the governmental prohibition on *Where White is the Colour* had not been revealed until recently. In Peter McDonald's *The Literature Police: Apartheid Censorship and its Cultural Consequences* of 2009, on pages 297 to 302, he gives a thorough account, thanks to his access to the released records of the very undercover censors who decided the book was 'undesirable' and who thus disallowed even private possession of it, ordering copies to be destroyed. This occurred despite several public cautions, including André P. Brink's warning in *Rapport*, quoted on the dustjacket of *Clippings*, that 'Wie nie kennis neem van Wopko Jensma se poësie nie, is uit voeling met die ingrypendste en sterkste kreatiewe werk wat daar vandag – in weerwil van sensuur en reëlreg teen sensuur – in Suid-Afrika verrig word'; that is, in effect, his plea to verligte Afrikaners to defy the conservative thought-controllers who at that date were stacking and burning especially poets of any innovative tendencies, particularly those developing in the lower reaches of their culture, let alone one whom McDonald describes on page 297 as 'an extraordinarily inventive white anti-poet.'

Considering that that period was also unprecedentedly productive, with nine established literary journals issuing poetry, as well as four reputable local publishers putting out slim volumes – headed by Oswald Mtshali's bestselling *Sound of a Cowhide Drum*, with Jensma's emblematic cover establishing the look of the brand, even unto today – only piecemeal defiances of the vigilantes of the Publications Control Board could be expected. With a good half of the country's cultural activists either silenced or driven into exile by the mid-1970s, one could only speculate on the reasoning behind the letting through of *Sing*, while *White is the Colour* was arrested, and then that the even more confrontational *Clippings* should appear without official hindrance.



Untitled 1976 pen & ink on magazine layout paper 266X210mm each

However, in September, 1983, Jensma was invited to the Wartenweiler Library at the University of the Witwatersrand to attend an award ceremony organised by the English Academy of Southern Africa. This was sponsored by Ad. Donker personally to celebrate the completion of his first decade in local publishing. Although all three volumes of Jensma's poetry had not been put out by Donker himself, Jensma nevertheless won a prize of R500 for his notable contribution to South African English writing over the same period. J.M. Coetzee and Mongane Serote were the other recipients.

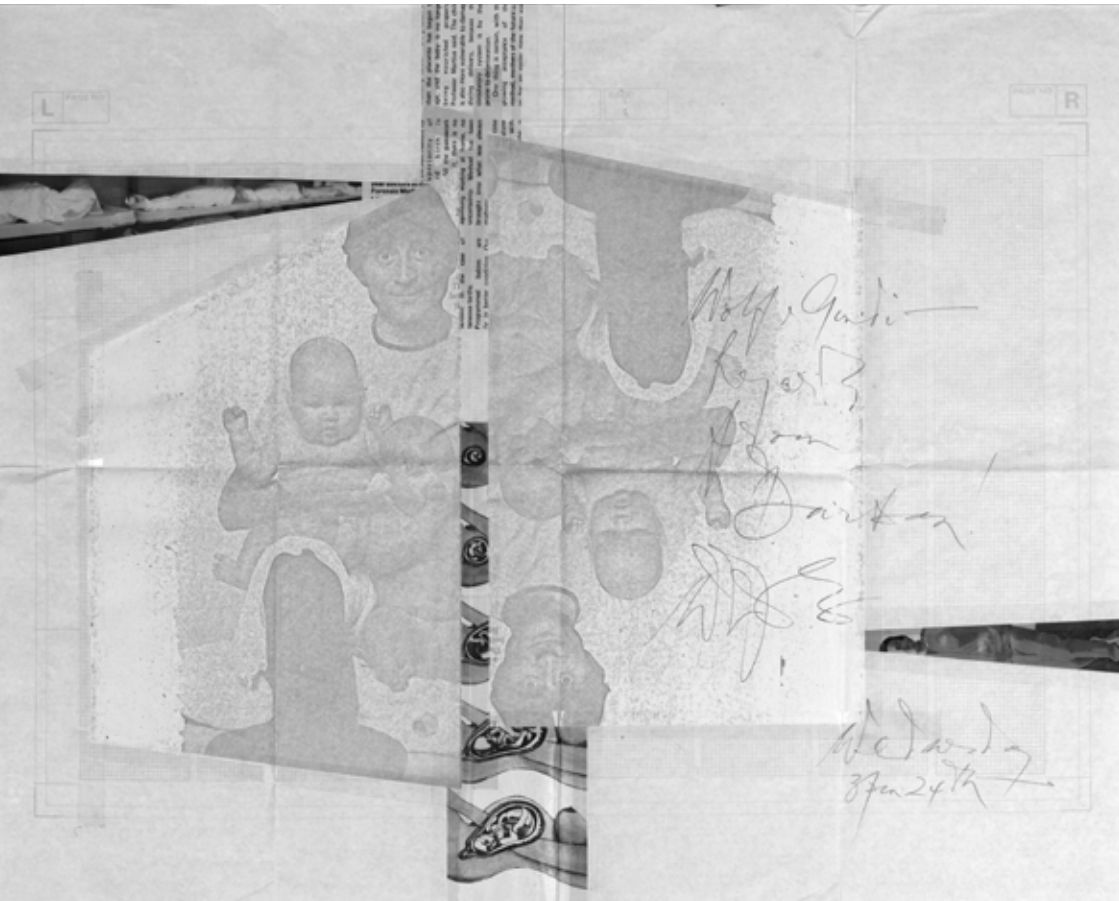
In conclusion, let it be recorded that since Jensma's supposed decapitation much data illuminating his tragic and haunting career has come to light. Particularly thanks to the donation of the *Ophir* archives to the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown, and to many other such benefactions, their holdings on Jensma have become open to researchers. There it becomes evident that he did later enjoy trips to Malawi and even to Holland, since various works of his were being evaluated and reproduced there. He had also personally relocated his wife and their children to Swaziland. In spite of the fact that he avoided Weskoppies, after considerable psychological help he was for a term interned in 1979 at Sterkfontein, only to be released, qualified for a pension.

My own recollection of him is in a room off Nugget Street beneath the Ridge, from which he made ends meet by selling off remaindered copies of *Sing*. Chiefly though he hung out at Doney's Restaurant, at the foot of Hillbrow's Highpoint skyscraper. There Robert Greig once had a flat, and that was the building off which Nadine Gordimer's stepdaughter hurled herself to her doom, followed in her wake by another hopeful poet, the conflicted Johann Mostert. There in the open at a café table Jensma would scribble his holographs on the back of an old envelope, being entitled to remain seated until some well-wisher came by to pay for the empty cappuccino cup before him, and perhaps order another with toasted sandwiches. Later in the Cape in the mid-1980s he would call upon Du Plessis out at Kalk Bay and just sit.

In late 1991, as he relates in his 'An Encounter with Wopko Jensma', the aspiring poet Gary Cumiskey had spotted a mention of his idol in the pages of *Penthouse*. This was in an article about Johannesburg's white tramps, which listed one recognisable 'promising young poet' as among the outies. Apparently he was resident in the Salvation Army's Men's Home. As Cumiskey recounts, there he submitted to some questioning, replying only absent-mindedly and distractedly, but emphasising that he did not really like visitors.

But before Cumiskey's account could appear in print (in Number 5 of Johannesburg's *Imprint*, published in Summer, 1995, on pages 48-50), Cumiskey, writing it out in January, had to add a note that Jensma had apparently absconded from the Home approximately one year before. All further attempts by Cumiskey to trace him, or establish contact with his family, had proved unsuccessful.

Such was Wopko Jensma's last recorded vanishing act.



Artwork/letter to Wolf & Gundi Weinek Collage, pencil on magazine layout paper 416X527mm

WOPKO JENSMA: a simplified account of his highly complex life

Wopko Pieter Jensma was born in 1939 and attended primary and secondary schools in Middelburg, Eastern Cape. He studied thereafter at Potchefstroom and Pretoria Universities, without completing a degree but he was able to study Fine Art in Pretoria. Jensma published his earliest poetry and art works in the Pretoria student magazine.

Like many of his co-evals, Jensma made trips to Lourenço Marques (now Maputo) during university vacations. There he met his wife, Lydia Thabede. They were married in Swaziland in 1967. They then moved with their children to Botswana where he taught arts and crafts at Swaneng Hill School outside Serowe. After a time, tensions arose between Jensma and his wife and between him and the school.

After an unsuccessful visit to the Netherlands (his father's country of origin), and after a failed attempt by the family to live in Swaziland, Jensma realised that it was possible for him to return – on his own – to South Africa despite his 'mixed' marriage. He arrived unannounced in Pretoria and never returned to live with his wife, her first daughter or his three children. From then on they had to survive by various means in Swaziland without much material support from their husband and father. Jensma divorced his wife in 1976.

From the early 1960s onwards, Jensma published poems of astonishing pungency and originality in a number of South African languages and dialects. These appeared initially, with his graphic work, in magazines such as *Wurm*, *Ophir*, *The Purple Renoster* and *Izwi*, examples of which are on display in this exhibition.

His art work – sculpture, woodcuts, linocuts, silkscreens and paintings – were shown at more than 24 exhibitions, mainly in Johannesburg and Pretoria. These artworks are discussed in Wilhelm van Rensburg's essay in this catalogue.

Jensma's poetry output over fifteen years resulted in four local collections, which are on display in the Gallery:

*Sing for Our Execution* – 10 poems. Ophir Publications 1971.

*Sing for Our Execution* – 40 poems plus interleaved woodcuts. Ophir/Ravan Press 1973.

*where white is the colour/where black is the number* – 44 poems plus collages. Ravan Press 1974.

*I must show you my clippings* – 16 poems, many in multiple sections, plus collages, woodcuts, drawings and photographs. Ravan Press 1977.

Jensma sought in his work and his life to elude the degrading focus in southern

Africa on 'race' and tried repeatedly but unsuccessfully to play a part in different organisations and social groupings. However, the terrible strain of his understanding and experience of public and private life, plus his deteriorating mental condition compelled him to take refuge in a series of institutions. He was awarded a state disability pension on grounds of chronic schizophrenia. By the late 1970s Jensma found creative work painfully impossible and he ceased to be productive.

Having lived for some years in the Salvation Army Men's Home in Johannesburg, he was taken one day in 1993 to hospital for his routine medication but was nowhere to be found thereafter. Searches of different kinds at different times have yielded nothing of his actual whereabouts.

Before his disappearance and after the death of their mother, his adult children were able to make contact with their father. These encounters were awkward and a source of discomfort but were important for everyone. Jensma's family, except for his late son, and their descendants now live in South Africa.

Jensma's visual and literary works – which need to be seen and read together – do not, as Peter Horn has pointed out, speak on behalf of discarded, rejected and oppressed people<sup>1</sup>. Jensma's work comes from within the experience of being discarded, rejected and oppressed and it expresses as few other artists have achieved the manifold horrors and pain of that condition.

Michael Gardiner

In memory of Wolf Weinek, and with special thanks to Gundi Weinek



*Untitled* 1974 Woodcut Artist's Proof II/V 482X639mm

This catalogue accompanies the exhibition *Possessing tools/professing artistry* at GALLERY AOP, Johannesburg in April 2013

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Horn. 1977. The psychological pauperization of man in our society. *Quarry '77*. Johannesburg: Donker, pp111-121.

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