Looking for Wopko Jensma


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
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.

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 (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:

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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."

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 AbdouMaliq
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 fn-
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.