

'I feel like hollerin but the town is too small': A Biographical Study of Wopko Jensma

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Wopko Jensma's important contribution to South African literature and art has—totally undeservedly—fallen into oblivion. Yet an appraisal of his cryptic and arcane poetry and experimental art forms suggests that he is on a par with more recognised figures such as Breyten Breytenbach—a coeval of Jensma—who has claimed the lime-light for quite a few decades by now. Jensma's debilitating schizophrenia and sudden disappearance have, no doubt, also contributed to waning public attention.

Jensma's published poetry, *Sing for Our Execution* (1973), *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* (1974) and *Have You Seen My Clippings* (1977) together with the relatively unknown and unpublished 'Blood and More Blood' deal with issues of identity relating to race and class within the context of apartheid South Africa in the nineteen seventies. These four volumes represent a poetics of resistance conceived as an antidote to personal and social suffering as a result of the racist oppression of blacks in South Africa.

Jensma's experimental poetry harnesses the signatures of jazz lyrics, concrete poetry, the avant-garde as well as African dance forms in bizarre cameos of underclass misery and racial oppression. In lieu of metrical regularity and rhyme the aesthetic experience is simulated by asemantic qualities of speech, sound and rhythmic undulations in a poetry characterised by what Samuel Beckett has called 'the withdrawal of semantic crutches' (Schwab 1994:6).

Jensma's schizoid discourse manifests itself as an asocial dialect with highly personal idioms, approximate phrases and substitutes which make his language extremely difficult to follow at times. Jensma's diction of private idiomatic language, mixing of dialects, the use of syncopation, ellipsis and experimental topography, have no doubt contributed to the enigmatic aberrations associated with schizophrenia. This schizoid versification is a

paradoxical wish to protect the core of oneself from communication whilst simultaneously expressing the need to be discovered and acknowledged. This private idiomatic language reveals ordinary people driven into interior psychological spaces, as well as psychotic and surreal extremes in order to survive an overwhelming and implusive reality.

This study is an attempt towards a reconstruction of Jensma's biography. A survey of published sources indicates that apart from newspaper reviews and reports, cursory citations in poetry and art anthologies, no comprehensive biography of Jensma exists. This biography has been sourced primarily from interviews with people who knew Jensma, occasional newspaper reports and by Jensma's correspondence in the archives of the National English Literary Museum in Grahamstown.

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Wopko Pieter Jensma was born on the 26 July 1939 in Ventersdorp in the Transvaal. He was the son of a Dutch father and an Afrikaner mother. According to Leo Nietzsche, a long time friend and student colleague of Jensma:

his mother was from a Coetzee family and was a music teacher. She excelled at the piano and tutored Jensma in the cello. Wopko had a younger brother and a sister named Elza, who was a year older than him. Jensma's parents were staunch Calvinists and religiously attended church. However, Jensma's family life was marred by the frequent alcoholic binges of his mother (Nietzsche 2001).

Both parents were never alluded to by Jensma, for, according to Jeanne Goosen with whom Jensma temporarily resided at Station Road, Littleton Manor in Johannesburg, he regarded the discussion of his parents as a taboo subject (Goosen 1999). The reluctance to discuss his parents was probably due to the trauma of being renounced by his family on the occasion of his marriage to Lydia, a black prostitute.

The name 'Wopko' was Friesian and was inherited from his father and subsequently passed on to Jensma's only son. In 1942 the Jensma family relocated to an agricultural college in the Karoo in the Cape. Wopko was three years old. The family business was a dairy, known as Jensma Creamery and

which supplied residents and shops in Middelburg. Jensma attended Middelburg Hoërskool and an article in the local *Middellander*, which also appears on the cover of *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977) indicates that he excelled at rugby:

Middelburg het Saterdag met een span afgereis na Hofmeyer om daar teen die plaaslike span te speel.

Albei spanne het probeer om die spel oop te maak hoewel dit 'n harde wedstryd was het hulle tog bewys dat harde rugby nog skoon kan wees. Daar is herhaaldelik aangeval maar die verdediging was dodelik, en elke man wat te ver hardloop is laag gevat en hard neergesit.

Hofmeyer se punte is aangeteken deur hulle agste man wat 'n drie gedruk het. Middelburg se eerste punte is aangeteken deur Jensma wat 'n drie gedruk het. Daarna het Minnaar na 'n mooi lopies nog 'n drie gedruk wat deur Jensma vervyf is. Eindtelling 8-3 (1977).

According to Leo Nietzsche (2001),

... when Wopko was fourteen he and his brother went to a nearby dam to swim. Wopko's brother drowned and Wopko could do nothing to save him. Wopko refused to accept that this was destiny and from then on was always rebellious.

This loss was later expressed in a poem, 'My Brother' in *Sing for Our Execution* (1974):

as clear as day i remember
my younger brother—
he left home one morning
and never came back

i remember we went to the river
i saw his body sleeping
deep under the water
i did not cry—

but i remember his quiet face
as he lay in his coffin
his nose and mouth stuffed
with clean cotton wool

i remember i was not surprised
when i saw him a week later
greeting me from amidst the crowd
at the market of our village (1974:65).

After matriculating at Middelburg Hoërskool, Jensma enrolled at the University of Pretoria in 1960. Although most published sources (Nielsen 1995) claim that he successfully completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree in 1964, a reading of his letters to Peter Horn, a close friend, indicate that this was not the case. In 1968, Peter Horn, a German national, who lectured at the University of Zululand in Kwa Dlangezwa, Natal, attempted to obtain a bursary for Jensma to study in Germany. Jensma had always cherished the idea of going to Europe. He replied on the 29th of January 1968:

My problem is that my degree is not fully completed (I had a fight with my Life Drawing Teacher, Leo Theron. He told me that I could sit there till my hair turned grey, he would not give me a pass, rather unfortunate) and I think that one must have a completed degree for the scholarship (Jensma 1968a).

On 13 March 1968 Horn responded:

Is there no way of completing your degree? Why don't you study through UNISA (University of South Africa)—or do you not get on with Battiss either? Fuck that Leo Theron (Horn 1968).

Jensma had been introduced to Peter Horn by Phil du Plessis. On 24 October 1966 he had written to Horn:

Our corresponding ways of thinking resonate. I write quite a lot of little verses, I translate more for bread. My actual medium is sculpture. I've spent long enough outside the borders to say like Big Bill Broonzy, 'I feel like hollerin but the town is too small'. This with reference to the present here. Most probably I shall become a voluntary exile—just to be able to live and work when and where I want to. The artist in me is difficult to confine. That's why I won't be classified and also not be fenced in any way at all: the way I see it: the soul frees itself from the temporal, and becomes one with the soul of all things (Jensma 1966a).

One of Jensma's friends on the Pretoria campus was Elza Miles, an Afrikaans tutor who took a particular interest in him as he was the only Fine Arts student studying Afrikaans in her tutorial group. It was the beginning of a lasting friendship. Miles explained in an interview:

... we clicked because of our Boere background. Whenever Jensma travelled to South Africa from Gaborone (where he was a school teacher) he usually stayed with me. He once brought Oswald Mtshali to my house (Miles 2000).

Jensma's poetry was published in the student magazine, *Gerwe*. Elza Miles recalls:

Jensma played a leading role in the magazine and he was strongly influenced by dada and automatic writing. His poetry was very much like jazz. He also knew a lot about African music, which he used in his poetry (2000).

According to Leo Nietzsche:

Wopko often shoved his poetry under the doors of the professors under the pseudonym of Jack Mafuta. He also delighted in frustrating the art lecturer, drawing inordinately huge parts of the body, for instance, that occupied the whole page (2001).

In 1965, Wopko went to study towards a Teacher's Diploma at the University of Potchefstroom. He did not complete this diploma as he was involved in a serious motorbike accident in which he sustained a serious head injury. Between 1965 and 1967 Jensma worked as a translator for APB Publishers. On 26 June 1967 Jensma wrote to Peter Horn:

I have translated three shit German books for APB. They are all for sale now—but the whole episode turned out a fiasco for me afterwards, though I got paid and my name appears on the front cover of the books (Jensma 1967c).

Socially, Jensma was an introvert and was described by Jeanne Goosen as:

a very sensitive person with a refreshing sense of humour. He never hated anyone. Jensma loved listening to the music of the jazz artist Dollar Brand, later known as Abdullah Ebrahim. The rhythmic blues and jazz refrains also figure significantly in Jensma's poetry. Wopko loved to play his jazz records day and night. In particular, he loved listening to the Portuguese *Fado's* (a sad lament). Wopko was idealistic by nature, a real Maxim Gorki!

He was kind hearted. On a friend's birthday, he'd usually give them a silkscreen which they framed. He was upset about the racial conflict in South Africa and detested the inhumanity of whites. Of course, he thought white prejudice very funny, it amused him.

Wopko knew a secret way out of South Africa to Gaborone and he helped many political refugees flee, people who were against the apartheid regime. Many of his friends were also held for questioning by the Special Branch of the South African Police, known as BOSS. Wopko was not an alcoholic, though he enjoyed a beer occasionally and he certainly did not take any drugs. His close friends and confidants were Sheila Roberts, Casper Schmidt, a psychiatrist who died of Aids in Manhattan in 1995, Phil du Plessis, the late artist, Walter Battiss and the alcoholic poet, Wessel Pretorius. Also amongst his associates were Aaron Kibel, the son of the Jewish/Polish painter Wolf Kibel, and Patrick van Rensburg. He also knew Bessie Head in Serowe. As for us we were an artistic group who met informally and spontaneously, like a real dada gang (Goosen 1999).

Jensma's woodcuts and silkscreen paintings were made in African styles and motifs which were integrated with Expressionist and surrealist techniques. He subsequently attracted the attention of King Sobuza at an exhibition in Gallery 111. Jensma was commissioned by King Sobuza of Swaziland to produce a series of woodcuts. These woodcuts were later acquired from a private collection by Warren Sieberts, an art dealer and displayed in the Rosebank shopping mall, the exhibition space being called 'Gallerie Metroplex' under the grand ostentation of creating a 'revolution in a shopping mall' (Blignaut 1996).

It is widely believed that whilst visiting the king's court Jensma fell in love with a Swazi maiden. This woman was Lydia whom he married in Mozambique in 1966. According to Jeanne Goosen:

Lydia was a prostitute in the old Lourenço Marques. Wopko hated white

women. He had a penchant for black prostitutes and it was really bad fate that he met with Lydia. Lydia claimed that Wopko made her pregnant. Out of a sheer Calvinistic sense Wopko felt it his duty to marry her. She frequently assaulted Wopko and humiliated him before his friends. She fucked around a lot (Goosen 1999).

Jensma was disowned by his entire family when he married Lydia. Jensma wrote to Peter Horn on 24 October 1966 about his marriage:

I illustrate with my life the opposite of the dogma here and in so far as I can deduce from hints—it doesn't meet with approval anywhere (Jensma 1966a).

On 8 December 1966 Jensma wrote to Horn inviting him to his new home:

My house is reasonably big—3 bedrooms—and my wife knows how to cook really good Portuguese food. Why don't you come over for a while. I've just done some paintings and sculptures. I'll send you some of them (Jensma 1966b).

Jensma and Lydia had a son, whom they also named Wopko and two daughters, Tanja and Stieneke. On account of the prohibitions of the Mixed Marriages Act, Jensma first relocated to Swaziland and then to Serowe, Botswana in 1967 to prevent his family being deported. In a letter to Lionel Abrahams, Jensma pointed out his reasons for leaving Swaziland:

Lionel, my application for residence in Swaziland has been refused—I have to get out of here by the end of the month. I'll go to LM (Lourenço Marques) next week (Jensma 1967).

The Mixed Marriages Act caused Jensma considerable consternation. He wrote to Horn:

I hope the Rhodesians do not hand me over to South Africa, You know the Mixed Marriages Bill they passed lately: do you have any recent information? Funny enough, there is a chap, Ndaba, in Johannesburg, running a weekly newspaper and married to an Irish woman. Must be an informer. I do not see any other reason for his comfort. He came here

penniless, but has returned from the other side with a smashing new American car (Jensma 1967d).

A few months later he inquired of Horn again: 'Is the Mixed Marriages Bill retrospective? Where do I fit in?' (Jensma 1967e).

A year later he wrote to Horn:

I would like to come for a holiday etc.—but I do not want to end up in jail. That would be most unfortunate. I hate narrowness of all sorts (Jensma 1968).

In Botswana Jensma taught for a year as a locum teacher at Swaneng Hill High School which was situated near the old Holiday Inn. The February 1967 edition of the *Swaneng Hill High School Newsletter* proclaims:

A new arrival at the school is Wopko Jensma, who is teaching Arts and Crafts to the first and second forms. These two forms are also doing woodwork with John Davies who came to the school last year and with Richard Sekgoma (1967:2).

The Swaneng Hill High School was also deeply involved with the local community and offered dressmaking courses through its *Basadi ba ba ithusang* (Women's Self Help Group). The headmaster of the school was Patrick van Rensburg who had previously been a South African diplomat for a period of ten years. Bessie Head, the famous black writer, also taught at the school.

Whilst at the school, Jensma attempted to establish a magazine called *Chain*. He wrote to Horn on 7 January 1967:

I have suggested the idea of an art/literary magazine to my principal and he quite liked the idea. Would you be interested to be on such an editorial board? The other names I have in mind I rather not mention in this letter (Jensma 1967a).

Jensma also wrote to the Nigerian writer, E.V. Seko, asking him to be on the editorial board of his magazine and to submit an article for publication. However, he was clearly frustrated by the apathy of local black artists and writers:

I explained the whole journal to them. They do not submit anything. They think I am making money out of it and they are going to get nothing: what a pity! (Jensma 1967).

Jensma had a great interest in African writers. He indicated in a letter to Horn on 16 January 1967:

I have developed quite a liking for Nigerian authors, especially J.P. Clark—he writes drama almost like Lorca (Jensma 1967b).

In another letter to Horn on the 26 July 1967 Jensma wrote:

I like the poetry of Paul Blackburn—have a taste of this:
our emerging African Nations

RAUNDA sit rightdown
and type myself letter

And maka be-lieve ita a
from President Kennedy
declaring me a Disaster Area
and offering me \$30 million for
reconstruction of my major cities
U-RUNDI? They'll ask, wo
ruined me? whom didi, ruin, whom?
What? Thirty million?

GWAN! (Jensma 1967d).

The use of satire and the predilection for an African worldview in Paul Blackburn's poem are important aspects of Jensma's poetry. This, together with the use of black humour, poverty and exploitation are insistent motifs in Jensma's poetry.

Jensma was aware that he was being monitored by BOSS. The year previously he had cautioned Horn:

If you write to me, please be careful. My letter will probably be checked by the Security Police. I have myself slipped up like this, that is why my name is on their file. The Special Branch did question me once, when I lived in Johannesburg. They knew the works—even more than I knew (Jensma 1966a).

Horn replied on 2 December 1966 with a reference to the lawyer and political activist, Bram Fisher:

I can assure you I have no intention of becoming a bungling Fisher I am not a professional revolutionary, and the fact is I would be caught the first time I wanted to plant a bomb or something silly like that. In any case I do not think that this country can be liberated in such a haphazard way. A revolution would have to be prepared even more meticulously than any war. I leave this to the experts in Dar Es Salaam, London and Nigeria, or where ever they might be (Horn 1966a).

Lydia took to selling Jensma's woodcuts and graphics outside the Holiday Inn. Between 1969 and 1970 Jensma worked for the Botswana Information Ministry as a graphic artist. In the Information Ministry he was attached to the Government Printing and Publishing Services in the Graphic Reproduction section. The relationship between Jensma and Lydia rapidly deteriorated. Jensma pointed out his reasons for leaving Swaneng Hill High School in a letter to Peter Horn dated 18 February 1971:

I left van Rensburg's (the headmaster) school because life with my wife became intolerable—now I don't know how long it'll still last. I'm not aggressive and I don't believe in violence and as violence is used against me, the only thing I know is to get as far away as possible. I can now see what a big fool I've been, how I've taken humiliation after humiliation—how I've suffered for a dream that wasn't worth dreaming. I'll probably have a lonely life from now but I won't return. I've returned too many times already (Jensma 1971).

Jensma eventually left his wife in 1969 after much acrimony. Phil du Plessis wrote in *Beeld*:

Die vrou was kwaai. As Wopko nie genoeg geld maak nie het sy hom met 'n besemstok oor die skene geslaan. Dit het so sleg gegaan dat Dokter Casper Schmidt, ook 'n slim digter, al die pad Gaborone toe gery het met sy Volkswagen om Wopko te gaan bevry. Hy het die vrou oorwin deur haar met 'n kinderwaentjie oor die kop te slaan en Wopko vinnig in die kar te laai (1991)

Lydia and the children went from Botswana to Manzini in Swaziland and Jensma arrived alone in Pretoria in 1971. He then moved to Johannesburg where he rented a flat in Bertrams and resumed teaching art at the Colin Smuts Open School. Colin Smuts was an acquaintance from the Botswana Ministry of Information where Jensma had previously worked (Gardiner 2000). Colin Smuts was the Director of the school and had been introduced to Jensma by Brian Egner. Brian Egner was Head of Information of the Botswana Press. Colin Smuts was also the secretary of the South African Trust Fund which came to be known as the United Democratic Front Cultural Desk. The poem 'suspect under section A1 Special' in *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977) alludes to Smuts, who was known as Jiggs to Jensma:

Stanley turrentine, you nut! Yes, don't mess
With mister T '—I agree, dji'se man van die dories, 'k sê
jiggs, jiggs 'k sê, hoe's hjou driving lately?
'fair to mild'—nei, 'k hoor djou met my linkeroor (1977:33)

Jiggs was also the name under which Colin Smuts wrote poetry (Chapman 1981:25). The word 'dories' (1977:33) is a reference to Doornfontein, one of the oldest suburbs in Johannesburg in which the Colin Smuts Open School was located. Colin Smuts recollected in an interview:

Wopko and I were close friends. We used to spend hours listening to jazz and just rap. We used to go together into Soweto and socialise. Although Wopko was white, he had his 'clearance' in Soweto: meaning that he was accepted. At times we used to dramatise Wopko's poems for the school children, it was great fun. We used to frequent art exhibitions. People would come up to me and ask if I was Wopko as I was a blackman. We laughed at the disbelief and shock it evoked when I pointed out Wopko, boere accent and all. Wopko often denied that he was white. He mischievously told anyone who cared to listen that his mother was Ethiopian and that his father was an Egyptian.

Wopko was fed up with teaching and decided to apply for a disability grant from the Department of Social Welfare. He asked me to write the letter as the Director of the school but I did not know what to say. So Wopko wrote the letter, claiming that he was mad and unable to work. I signed it. We went to the Department of Social Welfare together. Wopko left seven empty seats and sat on the floor. The

Department wanted to know if I was his 'boy'. This was the time of apartheid, you know. They stared in disbelief when I told them that I was his boss. Wopko got his disability grant. I was amazed that he had pulled it off. He never really was sick. It was the drugs they gave him at the hospital that made him sick (2001).

In an interview, Jeanne Goosen viewed Jensma's schizophrenia with circumspection:

... if he ever was suffering from schizophrenia it was surely due to his wife, Lydia. She made his life hell. When he was ill, he'd scream, have nightmares, mostly about Lydia. His condition deteriorated because of the continuous use of the drug stelazine, prescribed at the Weskoppies Outpatients Hospital. But I doubt that he was truly schizophrenic. I have a paramedical background and I would have known if he was schizophrenic. He showed none of the symptoms for weeks on end (2000).

Certainly Jensma himself alluded to his schizophrenia in *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977) in the poem 'Spanner in the what? works':

i brought three kids into this world
(as far as I know)
i prefer a private life to a public life (i feel allowed to say)
i suffer from schizophrenia
(they tell me) (1977:7).

According to Thys Nel:

when Wopko got excited or agitated he lapsed at times into a state of dementia. Once he took a piece of blue glass out of his pocket and gave it to me. He claimed that it was from the tomb of the Egyptian princess, Nephrites. As he grew more ill, he was mainly interested in tea and cookies. It was sad (2000).

These accounts chronicle the suspicion and conflicting viewpoints which circulated about Jensma's mental health. What is known for certain though, is that Jensma did receive treatment for schizophrenia which grew progressively worse.

Jensma lived for a while with Jeanne Goosen at Station Road, Littleton Manor, Johannesburg. For a pastime they read each other's poetry and dined out frequently:

We used to dine a lot at Billy's Baked Potato, near the fountains at least once a fortnight. We also used to go to the Grapevine in Pretoria ... just have coffee and *praat* [speak] nonsense ... we discussed mostly art, we never discussed politics (Goosen 1999).

Many people thought that Jensma was a black man because his art looked African and his poetry experimented with tsotsitaal. Mafika Gwala's comments in 1988 about an earlier encounter with Jensma are typical:

Wopko Jensma. For a long time I thought he was black...so when I met Wopko one morning, 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 (Gardiner 2000).

Under the apartheid system, people could apply to reclassify themselves into another race group if they provided proof for such change as laid out in the Population Registration Act. Jensma's reclassification of himself as a Black person compounded the confusion that existed about his identity. According to Jeanne Goosen:

At this time many whites had themselves classified as coloureds. Wopko's reclassification was an act of solidarity with the disenfranchised black people (1999).

Jensma poetry was also published in the magazine *Wurm* which was edited by Phil du Plessis and later in *Ophir*. *Ophir* was edited by Walter Saunders and Peter Horn and the early issues which contained Jensma's poetry were hand-printed. Jensma was a close friend of Walter Saunders in the late sixties when Saunders was a lecturer at the University of South Africa. At this time Jensma boarded with Wolf Weineck in Pretoria (Roberts 2000).

Over seventy poems of Jensma were published between 1967 and 1976 in *Ophir* alone, poems which generated awe and astonishment from contemporaries like Sheila Roberts, Athol 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
(Gwala 2000).

His poems were subsequently also published by other South African magazines such as *Snarl*, *New Contrast*, *The Purple Renoster*, *New Nation*, *Donga*, *Bolt*, *Izwe* and *Inspan* amongst others.

Jensma's poetry comprised of a range of experiments with topography, the irrational and with the acoustic dimension of poetry as well as issues of race, class and consumer culture. Jensma wrote to Peter Horn about his conception of poetry:

The condition which the poet sees must become a personal symbol. The poet is not a camera—reproducing 'reality', whatever that is. Poets after all write about nothing but themselves. I write with 'the rumbling thunder of emotion'. The only assistance the intellect can give poetry is in the concept of form—but to pump the form full of emotion also does not give it any validity. I use the Afrikaans of the Karoo Malat in some of my poems—above everything, I am just playing with words. This stuff doesn't go much deeper. For the most part it is done just for the sound (Jensma 1966c).

Jensma elaborated on his ideas about poetry in another letter to Horn:

As Virginia Woolf put it, an experience is followed up by a quiver in the subconscious which later results in the outpouring of the mind etc. And she also said: 'forget the experience, keep the quiver'. Ferlinghetti, Ginsberg, Kerouac and the rest: they all wrote the same rubbish, because it sells to the uninformed non conformist. The Westerner is still dreaming about the illusion Voltaire created in their minds (Jensma 1967a).

In an undated and untitled manuscript Jensma also wrote:

A poet digests life—when he spits it out, it's the poet's own spit—its got 'physical presence', its alive, its got blood. Yes, it is the poet himself, right there on the page (Jensma n.d.)

Jensma was also a graphic artist who worked mostly with woodcuts, but produced linocuts and monotypes as well. In a letter to Horn he confided:

I was trained as an artist but express myself better as a sculptor. My work is not non-figurative, but provisionally abstract. I respect Soutine, Rembrandt (overseas) and here, Kibel and Zachie Eloff. The best sculptor here is Sally Dismer (Jensma 1966b).

Being deeply interested in African mythology and iconography his fascinating forms suggests the influence of Michaux and describe 'human-animal-plant-spirit-creatures'. Of note are Jensma's three woodcuts entitled, *Mythical green-eyed creature*, *Mythical red-eyed creature* and *Mythical toothed creature* which are available on loan to libraries from the South African Library Service's Central Collection Of Art. In 1970 Jensma exhibited his art in New York and Oxford.

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 entitled *Sing for Our Execution*. By April 1973, according to a report in *Oggenblad*, Jensma had had twenty four exhibitions of his work. He excited the interest of poets, editors and gallery owners such as Wolf Weineck and Harold Jeppe.

In 1979 his works were amongst those displayed in an exhibition called South African Printmakers in the South African National Gallery. His work is currently represented in the South African National Gallery, Cape Town, the Durban Art Gallery and the University of the Witwatersrand Gallery as well as the William Humphrey Gallery in Kimberley.

The University of Witwatersrand Gallery was loaned an untitled silkscreen of Jensma dated 1974 by the Haenggi Foundation of Basle, Switzerland. The silkscreen has since been donated to the University of Witwatersrand Gallery. The Haenggi Foundation is a non-profit organisation which has two of Jensma's silkscreens as part of the Pelmama Permanent Art Collection. Fernard F. Haenggi also indicated in an interview that one of his daughters in Switzerland has a linocut of Jensma's entitled, 'The Scream' (2001). Hendrik van der Walt, a Durban psychiatrist, also has three linocuts used in *Sing For Our Execution* (1974) and a huge linoprint. The linoprint, Van der Walt explained, 'reflects a distinctive African feel and is drawn in a naïve kind of style' (2001).

The MTN Art Collection, since its inception in October 1997, has acquired an extensive South African printmaking collection. The MTN Art Collection, which is in Gauteng, has two untitled prints of Jensma along with prints by Digby Hoets, Walter Battiss, Alfred Goniwe, Sandile Goye, Guy Stubbs and Judus Sabela Mahlangu amongst others.

As a little known artist in 1967 Jensma caught the attention of Dan Rakwati, a Fine Arts student at the University of South Africa:

I went to a bookstore in Pretoria to purchase a book on fine art for an assignment on a South African artist. At the bookstore I met a salesman who introduced himself as Leo Nietzsche who suggested that I study the works of Wopko Jensma. Leo Nietzsche was a close friend of Jensma and a fine arts academic. He is presently teaching somewhere in Cape Town.

Wopko was amongst the few if not the only white at this point in time who depicted art in an African motif. This can be discerned particularly in the woodcuts. He also had an inclination towards mysticism. His early work was done primarily in a realist style and as he matured as an artist his work assumed a surreal and expressionist influence with a difference—it was executed in an African style. Wopko was influenced by contemporary artists such as Ben Enwona from Nigeria, Vincent Kofi from Ghana and Malangatana Valenté from Mozambique.

His poetry was a form of protest poetry written during the time of apartheid—at least he indicated as much in his letters to me. I have since lost these letters as I became blind from sugar diabetes and have had to relocate to a home for the blind in Johannesburg. It is ironical that although we corresponded so much via our letters we never had the good fortune to meet personally.

Wopko felt ashamed of being a whiteman. He felt that all whites had to share the blame for apartheid and its atrocities (Rakwati 2001).

Jensma wrote to Peter Horn:

It was by pure chance that I landed in the literary world. In any case it is an easier means of getting heard (but also more dangerous) than painting and so on. Perhaps one is safe if one speaks in symbols—like Kafka. Being literal is a little dangerous. In any case I am playing with fire at the moment, but my personal life is my own (Jensma 1966b).

Leo Nietzsche worked at Van Schaik's Bookshop in Pretoria. He was responsible for books in the 'Bantu' section of the shop. Nietzsche met Jensma at the University of Pretoria and thus began an enduring friendship. Nietzsche explains:

We once travelled together from Johannesburg to Lourenço Marques. Wopko sat in the backseat—drawing. Wopko also felt that poetry must come from the stomach. He never rewrote any poem. Even when the varsity magazine, *Gerwe* asked him to change a few lines, Wopko flatly refused. He was also a good friend of the critic, Karsipuu who advised him on his poetry. They spent many nights together discussing poetry. Karsipuu should quip, 'If you can get past me, you'll make it'. Karsipuu was an Estonian who worked at the CSIR (Council for Scientific and Industrial Research) as a translator and linguist. He produced several multilingual glossaries for the CSIR. Jensma never used 'I', and 'we' in his poetry, instead he advocated a firm focus on humanity. When I queried why he mixed up his languages in his poetry, Wopko replied, 'what language does God talk?'. In some ways he was profound. He was strongly influenced by the avant-garde. He often said about the European poets: 'whilst they were fucking in the sunlight, we were doing it in the dark'.

He felt that every person was born an artist—they only had to find the right medium to express their ideas. Wopko experimented with woodcuts out of yellow-wood, oil paintings, silk screens and pottery. Although all evidence pointed to the contrary, Wopko insisted that he was a realist. He felt that the element was more important than the subject matter. Wopko favoured linoprints and linocuts. In his prints he made interesting contrasts between black and white. He gave me an oil painting as a present. It was called 'The Black Night of the Karoo'.

Wopko felt that there was no difference between people and that everyone should be united. His views often resulted in him being called a 'wit Kaffer'.

In Mozambique we had a 'joll' visiting the clubs. We were invited to stay free of charge at an Indian man's house. His name was Akbar Babool (2001).

Jensma later wrote a poem entitled, 'In Memoriam Akbar Babool':

you introduced me to my first goddess
 'dis towns full a bitches
 ya wanna try one?'
afterwards we saw your home
 'loaded w'mosquitoes hea
 dey nibble ya ta pieces 'tnight'
creaky floor, a gauze door,
backyard of sand
in the middle a dagga plant
 'lets've suppa'n onion'n egg
 drive down dry bread a drop a wine'
next day the glittering town
prêgo and café com leite (1974:60).

Jensma presented both Peter Horn and Lionel Abrahams with copies of his poetry for their criticism. Abrahams replied to Jensma after reading his poetry on 24 May 1968:

You seem to value crypticness for its own sake. Your titles, numbering, arcane illusions and mysterious punctuation make your work more cryptic and bewildering. You have a great appetite for variety and a deep curiosity about the possibilities of disrupted words and phrases and about the formal placing of words on paper. These things, together with your use of ellipses and slurring of speech make you an exciting poet to someone fascinated by experiment, by exploration of the pure possibility of things (Abrahams 1968).

Horn voiced disapproval of Jensma's use of the avant-garde:

A sledge-hammer method might under certain circumstances be the subtlest method possible—and the most effective. You don't use watchmaker's tools to repair a car. The dadaist-surrealist method is no good for political poems (Horn 1966b).

Jensma believed in the Zen Buddhist credo of, 'first thought, best thought' and was reluctant to make changes to his poetry. He indicated as much to Peter Horn:

Sorry to send these back, but please could you be more explicit in your criticism. Regarding your question marks, do they mean that these parts should be left out? ... rewritten? ... you don't like them but you'll put up with them?...or what ...? (Jensma n.d)

Blood and More Blood (n.d.) was an unpublished collection of poems by Wopko Jensma which appears to predate his published anthologies. Colin Smuts claimed that a collection of Jensma's unpublished poetry was initially rejected by Mike Kirkwood of Ravan Press. It is a hesitant presumption that the poems referred to *Blood and more Blood* (n.d.). *Blood and more Blood* (n.d.) was located in the archives at NALN by Professor Johan van Wyk in April 2001). *Blood and more Blood* had been previously stored in the Human Sciences Research Council. Erika Terblanche, a curator at NALN explained in an interview:

Wopko Jensma had placed a fifty year embargo on the manuscript of *Blood and More Blood*. However there is no date to indicate when the embargo should commence (2001).

The title is a fitting epigraph to a poetry of excess, capturing the leitmotifs of macabre violence and anguish in Jensma's poetry. This anthology consisted of thirty four poems. Twenty nine of these poems had since been published in Jensma's three volumes of poetry.

As co-editor, Peter Horn was so impressed by the quality of the poetry that Jensma submitted to the journal, *Ophir* that he proposed a special issue which appeared in 1971 with ten poems entitled *Sing For Our Execution*. In 1975 Horn published a critical article on the poetry of Jensma in *Quarry*'77, which was published by Ad. Donker. Horn raised the issue of Jensma's attempts to speak on behalf of others. He quoted Cherry Clayton:

The consciousness of [Jensma's] poetry is a suffering 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 1994:36)

Horn argued that this view totally misrepresented 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 the large bereft of speech. But it is not simply *somebody else's* inarticulateness, nor simply that of the black or 'coloured' masses: it is his own inarticulateness struggling towards speech (Horn 1994:36).

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 (Gardiner 2000: 8).

Sheila Roberts recollects:

During 1972-1973, I taught at the University of the Western Cape and rented a big, old house at the Strand. Wopko had a cousin living in the Strand and he would come over to my place for meals a couple of times a week. He always brought drawings and graphics (woodcuts etc.) with him and I would buy his work whenever I had the money. I still have two, a woodcut and a collage. I tried writing his story, as fiction of course, in my piece, 'Mbiti Herself' which appeared several years ago in *Contrast*. When Wopko's book *I Must Show You My Clippings* came out, I was working as an editor for Ravan Press. I wrote a review of the book which Mr. Van Zyl recorded on cassette. I never received a copy of the tape and it probably no longer exists. In any case the review was verbose and pompous. (I was younger then and keen to show off) (2000).

Sing For Our Execution (1973) as well as Jensma's subsequent volumes of poetry were all typeset by the author himself. In a letter to Peter Horn Jensma indicated that he had initially planned to publish his poems at his own expense:

I believe one could print your own volume of poetry at a low cost, say 50, to distribute to friends only. The Dutch poet, Marsman, printed his first volume this way. Some space was covered by woodprints by a friend. (Jensma 1967b).

Sing For Our Execution (1973), was reviewed by at least thirteen newspapers and journals to print reviews, often accompanied by reproductions of woodcuts from the collection.

Mary Morison Webster wrote in a review in *The Sunday Times* in 1973:

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 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 like a blackman (Webster 1973).

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 (1973:12).

An editor of the *Eastern Province Herald*, however, was cynical about Jensma's poetry:

No one could be as sour, tough, bitter and rough as Wopko Jensma makes himself out to be, unless Mr. Jensma happens to be a green marula plum. One cannot doubt the intensity of the bitterness nor its all too probable justification. No doubt, any suffering that Baudelaire or T.S. Eliot underwent was, in comparison of those known or observed among his own people by Mr. Jensma, trifles (Henderson 1973).

Whereas Lionel Abrahams, in the *Rand Daily Mail*, 6 January 1975 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.

The *Oggenblad* review concurs:

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 black or white (Van Dis 1973).

Peter Wilhelm elaborated:

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 (Wilhelm 1973).

It was perhaps Anita Moodie's review in *Rapport* which most accurately summed up the significance of Jensma's first volume of poetry:

... sorg, smaak en noulettendheid het hierdie boek een van die fraaiste en genotvolste produkte van die Suid-Afrikaanse drukkuns gemaak.

Dit vestig Wopko Jensma se naam in Suid-Afrika as 'n sterk en kontensieuse digter en beeldskepper. Hy het nie oornag opgeskiet nie. Hierdie gedigte is 'n keur uit 'n oeuvre wat oor die afgelope dekade ontstaan het.

Dit is nou die tyd om dit duidelik te stel dat Wopko Jensma net so 'n belangrike skeppende kunstenaar is as enige wat Suid-Afrika nog voortgebring het.

Gevolgtrek is dit 'n boek wat ons netjiese indelings deurmekaarkrap. Ten eerste veronderstel dit dat alle Suid-Afrikaners eentalig is. Ten tweede skep dit vreugde uit die waarneming dat ons in ons poësie skeppend sal moet kreoliseer uit Engels, Afrikaans, Amerikaans 'slang' uit die 'blues', Tswana, Johannesburgse straattaal, spreektaalvorme van Lourenco Marque—en verder alles wat in swang is.

Dit sal die leser nie lank neem om agter te kom wat aan die gang is in Jensma se poësie nie, want sy werk is onmiddellik toeganklik. Hy is beslis nie-literêr. Hy is 'n naiëwe digter in die goeie sin van die woord en so 'n natuurlike surrealis dat mens dit skaars opmerk—die pyn, ontwigting, fragmentering van groot onderwerpe in plofbare miniature, die vulgêre satiriese klappe vanuit onverwagte

oorde: as mens eers gewoon raak aan die vreemde rangskikking van die taal, is dit maklik verteerbaar (Moodie 1973).

The woodcuts in the book also provoked comment:

I find it difficult to analyse my reaction to Jensma's hideously skeletal woodcuts. At first one feels compulsive fascination together with a horrid bewilderment. One cannot assess their merit; they appear to be neither decorative nor illuminating—except perhaps by contrast, for by contrast the poet speaks with a clarity that the artist has not deemed it necessary to attain. But while reading the poems one begins to understand something of the frustration and the brutality of the illustrations which gradually begin to achieve significance as a visual accompaniment to the verse (Smailes 1974:29).

The titles and form of several of Jensma's poems, as well as their dedication to various black singers and musicians suggest the influence of jazz. Jacques Alvarez-Pereyre in his book *The Poetry of Commitment in South Africa* comments on Jensma's use of jazz:

Jensma's use of jazz must be seen as homage to the black population, which in South Africa as in America, is the chief repository of this form of expression. At the same time it is also his way of expressing his joy in sharing with communities from which he is separated by law.

There is more: jazz requires people to participate fully in life, it makes them completely human because it enables them to infuse living with the rhythm and freedom which tends to be suppressed in everyday life; it is here that another essential characteristic of Jensma's poetry can be seen (1984:105).

In a letter to Lionel Abrahams, Jensma indicated his interest in jazz:

The radiogram you sent me gives me endless pleasure. I have two records of Bessie Smith here and the more I hear them the deeper they touch me. My friend, who was in America, bought me a record by her teacher, Ma Rainey—the blues has always been part of my life. I compare it to the Portuguese fado, which is to me, the greatest art: simple stories of everyday life that almost sob, but not.... (Jensma 1971).

On 17 March 1973 Jensma submitted a cursory biography on a single page to the National English Library Museum of South Africa (NELM). In it he describes his occupation as an artist and not as a poet. Jensma gives his address as 416 Ridgeway Court, 133 Nugget Street, Johannesburg and claims that he has travelled to all countries in Southern Africa and once to Europe. It is noteworthy that Jensma mentions that he 'writes from an 'African' point of view' (1973:1).

This predilection for an African worldview was corroborated in an interview with Jeanne Goosen:

Wopko taught his friends silkscreen paintings. He did not believe that art was a Eurocentric talent. If one was interested, that was enough. Most of his woodcuts drew their inspiration from African mythology (1999).

In a letter to Peter Horn, Jensma was critical of the pervasive influence of western ideas on Africa:

I have not seen anything here which speaks the language of Africa. Everything is monotonously hammered around the remains of the European 'civilisation'. Does the word 'civilisation' mean anything to you? It means nothing to me. The Westerner only succeeded because of his technical abilities, by creating the monster, the machine! In our civilisation we only depend upon the machine. Our God. This is nothing more than a mere 'set up'. It tires me. I guess Charlie Parker was right: 'civilisation is a wonderful thing if only someone would try it' (Jensma 1966c).

In 1975 Jensma's next volume of poetry, *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* was published by Ravan at a price of four rands and fifty cents. The book was printed by Zenith Printers of 509 Diakonia House, 80 Jorissen Street, Braamfontein in Johannesburg. The book was available from leading booksellers as well as direct from the publishers. *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* (1975) and Jensma's subsequent volume of poetry, *Have You Seen My Clippings* (1977) included collages and montages based on photographs by white and black artists (Alvarez-Pereyre 1984:105).

This collection of poetry was dedicated to Jensma's close friend, Walter Saunders, editor of the poetry magazine, *Ophir*, who was instrumental in

getting Jensma's poetry published. The book comprised of a collection of poems interspersed by drawings and photographs. The photographs are montages of everyday township and working life which focus on the despair and privation of blacks. The drawings are surreal representations of African mythical beasts. Vita Palestrant took the photograph on the backcover and the collages in the book were drawn up by Lourenco Carvalho, Kok Nam and Mike McCann. The drawings were by Mslaba Dumile from the Durban Art Gallery.

Lionel Abrahams reviewed *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* (1975) under a rather interesting caption, 'Exercise in mind expansion':

'Conceived, typeset and designed' as well as written by Wopko Jensma, this book is more than merely a bilingual collection of poems. It uses several varieties—some ethnic and some private—of English and Afrikaans.

But beyond the writing, it is a picture book, a polemic, and a practical exercise in mind expansion for South Africans. The pictures are mostly montages of photographs of sociological subjects with newspaper headlines and some graphic work. With the title they give the book of being essentially a socio-political gesture.

And indeed, the majority of the more accessible poems, most of them in Afrikaans, strikingly substantiate such a gesture. Jensma is particularly good at cutting whips of satire and invective out of the very hides of the white man's sacred cows, more especially the Afrikaner's.

But it seems that this brilliant, direct attack on smugness, hypocrisy and moral stupor is not enough for Jensma. Most of his poems, the ones in various slangs, argots and dialects, and even a number of the 'straight' English ones, are obscure in style and meaning. If one approaches them open-mindedly some of them yield glimpses of earthy life-styles or dream-imitations of guilt and nemesis. But the didactic presentation of the volume throws up expectations of coherent statements, and these are lacking in these rather private and experimental verses. So a considerable tension is produced, which Jensma obliquely acknowledges by giving a mock exegesis of one of his poems. His overall intention is suggested in the closing remark, 'This exegesis is also available in english—upon request—be you not dis ting they call whiteman or blackman'.

Jensma's esoteric range of styles and languages reflects his experience of life cruelly fragmented by South Africa's system of sharp categories, clashing interest and maiming prejudices. Less by what it says than by what it does in forcing us face to face with the obscurity of many poems reflecting various ways of life on our sub-continent, this book attempts to make a practical protest against that fragmentation by jolting us out of our insular habits of thinking. Whether it begins to succeed will be one topic in the debate that is sure to rage over this unusual book (1975).

The debate over Jensma's poetry continued in the *Cape Herald*:

When *Sing for our Execution* was published a year ago, *Cape Herald* wrote boldly that Jensma would rank with South Africa's greatest poets, including van Wyk Louw and Roy Campbell. Since then, more distinguished critics have also hailed Jensma's graphic and poetic work... his latest collection of poetry and photo montages goes way beyond *Sing For Our Execution* to a type of esoteric communication which this reviewer finds himself incompetent to judge.

Look at for instance:

com doeks, la
skom's homne-dja
man vanne baas
mak come doeks hei

or again,

train you turn on
soul o say yebo
drop us a line
say your crank jam!

What is he saying? Is Jensma more deeply South African than ever before? Is his insight profound, prophetic beyond the understanding of ordinary men? Or has he gone beyond the perceiving and expressing of realities? I would hesitate to say.

Certainly some of these poems are unintelligible to me. His jargon, call it creole or tsotsi or Jensma, sounded so authentic before. Now it sounds like hallucination. The photo montages are a lot less exciting than the woodcuts in the earlier book (1975).

Mark Swift in a review in *The Cape Times* was much more generous, lauding Jensma as an:

ebullient, reckless spender of words, who bends every rule in the book (including his own) to mystify, amuse and sadden. From a scaffold of collages and photographs, he has scrawled an epitaph in graffiti on another year of South African experience... Jensma is always as good as he is bad. A true original (1975).

On 27 June 1975, *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* (1975) was banned by a notice published in the Government Gazette in Pretoria (Pretoria Bureau 1975).

In an interview in Durban in July 1975 following the banning of the book, Jensma retorted:

to have one's book banned in this country is to be given a literary prize, it is at least some indication that people are reading one's work and one should take it as an honour. The identity struggle in Europe for artists and writers is so hard they turn to suicide. In South Africa it is easy—the politicians make it easy for us. Politicians always think they know so much about arts and culture. As in Russia, they attach too much importance to literary people.

Jensma goes on to comment upon the enigma surrounding his identity:

I am always so amused when people do not know what colour I am. They always take me to be a blackman. Two reviews of my book were written on the assumption that I was a black man.

Jensma attributed this confusion of identity to his style of writing—a mixture of pidgin English, Afrikaans, Portuguese, French, German and African languages. He also mentioned that his unusual name caused further confusion:

This is probably one of the main themes of my writing that people must always try and identify you first before they can make judgements. To me it does not matter what colour you are. Artists are constantly looking into society and people don't like this at all. One sees all too often an artist acclaimed when he is dead because he can present no more threat to that society. Perhaps I have looked into the ills of this particular society and present too much of a threat. But I can assure you of one thing. Old Tant Sannie from Blikkesdorp is not going to read my poetry. It is of some significance too that my latest book has been on sale for over six months before the banning order came into effect two weeks ago (1975).

Commenting on moves by the Afrikaans writers to form a writer's guild to fight censorship, Jensma said that he had never adhered to any group activity but that it 'is fine as long as they get something done' (1975).

At this point in time (1975) Jensma was working for Republican Publishers in Durban as an illustrator. He claimed to be busy working on ideas for a new volume of poetry and said that he could not afford to pay for an appeal against his banning. Elza Miles (2000) recollected in an interview, 'In Durban, Jensma lived in a flat on the Marine Parade, on one of the top floors.

During his stay in Durban Jensma submitted five African tales to Jack Cope, the editor of *Contrast* in Cape Town. The titles were 'Monna-Mago Brings Rain', 'A Beggar named Makopi', 'Motsomi and the Lion', 'Bubi's Journey' and 'The Flying Hands'. These stories were each about a page in length and were about the fables of Africa. Unfortunately, these stories were not published and are presently stored in the archives at NELM.

It was whilst in Durban that Jensma wrote to Horn:

I trust I am making myself clear—especially to those who feel their minds need borders. To those intellectuals with either left or right wing hang-ups and morals—to those who find themselves baffled by my way of life, my creative work. My work is not faked, nor phony, nor lifted from somewhere (Jensma 1975).

Jensma moved from job to job and from city to city. He did not believe in staying in one place for more than six months (Goosen 2000). After a productive sojourn in Durban in 1975, he returned to Johannesburg to put together his last published collection, *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977).

This third collection was published by Ravan Press in Johannesburg and sold at a price of four rands fifty cents. The book was printed by Zenith Printers of 509 Diakonia House, Braamfontien, Johannesburg. This volume of poetry was a collection of poetry interspersed by newspaper clippings, drawings and photographs. Most of the poems in this anthology had already appeared in literary magazines such as *Ophir*, *Contrasts*, *Quarry '76*, *A World of their Own* and *Open School Poetry*. *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977) differed from his previous volumes of poetry in its experiments with concrete poetry, collage and the frequency in which absurd inventories were used.

In a review in *World Literature Today*, F.R. van Rosevelt, from the University of Maine in Portland-Gorham commented:

What an enviable title *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977) is! Anyone accepting Wopko Jensma's invitation to see and read what is indeed a collage of newspaper clippings, poems and graphics will not be disappointed. Jensma's third book of poetry is one wherein poems and clippings complement each other. He himself features in a few clippings, as does the Frisian dairy of his forbears, but it is his total South African involvement he wishes to show us, graphically and literally. For example, a newspaper clipping about the poet, Ingrid Jonker (drowned in Bantry Bay more than a decade ago) faces a poem addressed to the still imprisoned Breyten Breytenbach. The latter is asked of all things, 'not to allow hatred to petrify his heart'. Sad to say, it is this very appeal which already dates Jensma and some of his poetry as it reveals simultaneously the standstill to which the country has come, in body and soul, politics and poetry alike. An impasse, because Jensma appeals to the politically naïve Breytenbach, who has since been reduced to a whimpering shadow of himself, reportedly grateful when he is no longer restricted to solitary confinement but to general imprisonment instead!

Jensma's obsessions are confinement, mutilation and crisis of identity. Desperate poetic method, however, cannot clarify or objectify his essential predicament, which is a lack of sanity. Of course, evoking Weimar Germany as he does is metaphorical in itself; but still he should not write about his world in terms of madness, junk and numbers only, for to do so is to call down madness on oneself. Instead, he might try to objectify his chaos. In a country where life and predicament are one and the same thing—and Jensma is not unlike our own

here, but only more so—to talk about one's country at all means of course to get caught up in that country's values and its terms. Jensma might want to avoid doing this, because in order to fight one's enemy one runs the risk of becoming like one's enemy in the process. Not surprisingly, the jacket blurb on this book tells us that 'it is impossible even from a close examination ... to determine the colour of his skin!'

Jensma's language is fragmented but sharp as glass. His sense and his salvation lie in his poems (his self portraits on the beach are silly and poorly reproduced here). These pieces, however fragmented, cast precisely the diffuse spectrum that might restore his and our heart of darkness.

i am tired, so very tired
tired of the hate stare
tired of the broken telephones
tired of non-white entrances
tired of being a burden
I am tired, tired of hating...

These clippings are a powerful dossier against the state of things

In a review of *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977), in *Reality*, Marie Dyer comments:

The persona of the poems is appropriately less diverse than before. There are comparatively few excursions into dialect; most poems are all English or all Afrikaans. 'I Jensma'—or more accurately, 'I, jensma'—appear specifically in one poem and is implicit in many; perhaps, allowing for ironies, in most. In previously published poems he seems to have made himself a mouthpiece for the experiences and feelings of many different South Africans, but here the concerns, though always socially relevant, are more particularly his own.

Jensma makes very great demands on his readers. A knowledge of Villon's French as well as a little German and Gammattaal is assumed; but more importantly, his technique of fragmentation and dislocation—of images, syntax, even spelling and typography—involves immense effort in bringing the disparate elements into some kind of coherence. In one poem, avowedly dada in influence (chant of praise for the idi amin dada) he expresses some dadaist intentions and attitudes:

PROTEST AGAINST LAW

The law of tension
The law of precalculation
The law of reason
The law of aggression
The law of intrigue, the game

This seems to be the manifesto applicable to many of his own poems, which in their 'disparate images, incomplete sentences, non-sequiturs, and antitheses, are constructed in a kind of defiance of disciplined reason and the tensions of logic.

On the one hand, it is difficult to be sure that the main intention of these poems is being conveyed to the reader; on the other, it seems clear that the technique itself is an act of protest against what Jensma sees as the crippling, limiting, and fundamentally aggressive domination of rigid reason and calculation of human affairs. In all his poems he reveals a sense of the sickness of his society; it appears that he is exploring here what may be regarded as the philosophical as well as the political sources for it.

The severed ear of Van Gogh is a recurring symbol in these poems, apparently suggestive of the power and truth of genuine suffering, and Jensma seems to contrast this both with the artistic images of Van Gogh's paintings and also with his own poetry. These lines from 'the ceiling just caved in today' seem to imply that Jensma is afraid that art itself can impose an unreal or petrifying pattern on the vitality of real experience:

I, Jensma, I am also a so called real artist...
... but don't worry, van ol chap, I Jensma
I am having it bronzed!

The nature and feel of the poetry can best be given by a quotation. This is the middle section of the last poem in the book: 'I know no heroes':

In these subterranean rooms
My entrails under paper weights
I keep singing this song
Of one thousand unmade beds
Of one thousand dust bins
Of one thousand dark alleys

Of one thousand chicken livers
(neatly tied in plastic packs)
as I turn stones of my life
grab scorpions sleight of hand
unwind untie the poison sting
let my past slip down my gullet

This is characteristic of its un-worked-out quality: its compelling but unelucidated images, its unexpected juxtapositions of various tones and styles, its catalogue of illogically selected elements, combining to evoke a sense of protesting alienation. It seems that in these poems Jensma struggles continually not to be facile, not to falsify complexities with imposed order and clarity. (Even the drawings and photographs, though intriguing, are enigmatic). These struggles are sometimes exhausting rather than illuminating to the reader—like watching a man struggle to pick up invisible weights. But these are impressive and disturbing, and demand, if not to be understood, at least to be seriously attended to (1978).

Emmanuel Ngaru was much more critical of *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977). In a review for *The Africa Book Publishing Record* Ngaru wrote:

Wopko Jensma writes about himself and about the South African situation. He says repeatedly in the first poem: 'I found myself in a situation' and his poetry is indeed an attempt to reflect the situations he finds himself in. Although we detect a voice of protest against the social conditions in South Africa, we can hardly describe Jensma's poetry as 'militant' or even 'protest' poetry. The poet's statements about South Africa are observations rather than critical comments. For African readers, Jensma is not likely to hold much of the attraction as his criticism of South African life is not strong enough to have any real impact on social attitudes. To Western readers opposed to apartheid, however, Jensma offers something; here is a South African who writes simply as a South African. He displays no Afrikaner nationalism, neither does he show any prejudice against blacks. His style demonstrates how he attempts to be a fully integrated South African without any racial or nationalist labels; he writes in both English and Afrikaans (though most of the time in English) and he even uses a sprinkling of African words and African names, mainly Sotho.

Though his style is informal and light-hearted, Jensma's poetry tends to be obscure and frequently fails to make an impact on the reader. However, there are a few poems which draw their strength from rhythm and sound effects, example, 'the ceiling just caved in today' and 'I know no heroes' Of considerable interest are the author's clippings—including photographs of newspaper cuttings and photographs of himself and the Brazilian poet Manuel Bandiera. These are no doubt intended to make visual accompaniments to verbal art, but they are of little artistic value. The book is recommended for library purchase—with reservations (1978).

William Pretorius, writing for *Rapport* gave a positive and incisive appraisal of Jensma's third volume of poetry:

In Wopko Jensma's book *I Must Show You My Clippings* (1977), there is a collection of poems under the heading 'Chant of Praise for the Idi Amin Dada' in which there is a play of words on the Black statesman's surname and the literary movement. In fact, the definition of Dadaism found in the *Penguin Companion of Literature* could describe some of Jensma's own poetry:

Its chaotic experiments with language, form ... were an affirmation of radical irrationality and futility as a protest against all bourgeois notions of meaning and order.

In Jensma's poetry there is a lively and original experimenting with words, and even the letters of words ... he breaks down words, rearranges them, squeezes them into various political forms, all of which at times gives his work a sense of artificiality and obscurity. At times, too, his word manoeuvring gets the upper hand at the expense of the poem's content, and his poetry drifts off into a whimsical playfulness ... he uses language as well to rattle the foundations of an establishment that has grown stodgy in its own self-satisfaction, content to see no further than 'the good life'.

In a sense, Jensma's unruly poetry is a reaction against this syndrome. He is an interesting and original voice in South African poetry. Jensma built no structures, he established no institutions, he created no stable circle of friends and admirers. In this respect he was very 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 mentions Jensma in their account of cultural history (1977).

Shiela Roberts commented in *Contrast*:

As it is impossible even from a close examination of his poetry and woodcuts to determine the colour of his skin—not that I consider such a determination in any way important—and as he writes in various ‘voices’, from English and Afrikaans to Tsotsi and Gammattaal, he does indeed appear to be the first wholly integrated South African (1977:14).

In an interview on 2 October 2000, Sheila Roberts commented further:

About my comments that the colour of Wopko's skin could not be assessed from the poems themselves—I agree that this assertion is totally irrelevant and am ashamed of it now. But it was not so irrelevant in 1971, which is when I wrote it, I believe. There had been so many bannings of books, journals, films and music that there was, as I recall, a mood of nervous revolt amongst writers; nervous, because we all bore in mind the kind of terrorism that the editor, Donald Woods, had to face when he tried to find out the truth of what had happened to Steve Biko. For someone like me, an anxious fledgling writer and a clumsy critic, Wopko's use of varied voices and dialects seemed a bold strategy, an act of defiance against the official categorisation of human beings, himself included.

Michael Gardiner has drawn an interesting parallel between Jensma and the South African poet and novelist, Breyten Breytenbach:

Jensma has received very different treatment from the adulation with which every Breyten Breytenbach production was 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 faction of South African society which controls the means of production, which generates wealth and shapes reality according to its notions of what is fit and proper (Gardiner 2000: 4).

In 1979 Jensma lived in a flat in Joubert Park in Johannesburg. He be-

befriended Thys Nel and they frequently visited each other. According to Hendrik van der Walt:

Wopko was the picture of an eccentric artist. He looked like a farmer, with khaki shorts and veldskoens. Wopko was not talkative, in fact he appeared withdrawn. He also had numerous black friends, which was unusual for a white man in the seventies (2001).

Thys Nel was introduced to Jensma by a mutual friend, Rita Cohen. Nel said:

When I met Wopko he was already in a state of schizophrenia. I found him to be a warm, humble person. He told me that he had stayed with Casper Schmidt for a long time. Casper was a psychiatrist who has since moved to New York where he died. When I met Wopko he had stopped writing (2000).

In 1983 Jensma was one of the winners of the Creative Writing Awards sponsored by Mr. Ad Donker of Johannesburg, to mark the tenth anniversary of his publishing firm. The award was to honour three authors who had made a notable contribution to South African literature in English in the last ten years. Jensma was awarded the five hundred rands prize money and a certificate for 'originality of voice and vision'.

The other awardees were Mongane Wally Serote and J.M. Coetzee.

Clinton V. du Plessis was inspired to write the following poem after seeing what was alleged to be Jensma's photograph in *Playboy* magazine. The photograph was of a hobo in Joubert Park (2001), 'let me show you my clippings'.

i saw u
trying to lie down
(between the airbrushed beavers
and designer tits
of the playboy bunnies)
bumming around, if i remember correctly,
in joubert park
with a couple of white brothers
i guess it was easy deciding:
to shut the windows.

to lock the doors.
to throw away the key.
to walk away from the unfinished poems.
to run from the fire burning in your head.
to forget about the answers and all the possible questions.
to close your eyes and see the bright sun.
to try to recall the good times.
to take the last drink.
to cross the red robot.
(to stop paying off your past debts in instalments)
i saw u
trying to pick up pace
trying to move with the agility of a wing
i saw u
trying to join the backline one more time
but u kept on stumbling
i saw u
trying to get up or maybe trying to lie down.

Jensma wrote to Lionel Abrahams in 1983, merely informing him about his whereabouts: 'I've been living with my father for the past year at 25 Smid Street, Middelburg, in the Cape' (Jensma 1983).

Jensma's last known address was the Salvation Army Men's Home in Simmonds Street, Johannesburg. Michael Gardiner recounts his visit to Jensma in the hostel in 1987, ten years after his last publication:

'I don't want to become a campus guru'. This is the response Wopko gave to my request for permission to photocopy his poems for my students—his published works were now out of print. We were listening to the jazz artist Herb Ellis, Jensma having asked me to take off the inferior music of Ken Burell.

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, where he had taken refuge from his thoroughly disabling schizophrenia.

On seeing Jensma, 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 the 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 days 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 (2000).

In addition to his pension, Jensma received a monthly payment from Abraham de Vries. In 1988 art historian and researcher, Elsa Miles was involved in putting together an exhibition called *The Neglected Tradition*. On the day of the opening she went to pick up Jensma but he was unable to accompany her because of his steadily deteriorating mental condition.

In 1988 a band calling itself 'Mud Ensemble' and comprising of Marcel van Heerden, Juliana Venter, Thomas Barry, Nicholas Hauser, Kenneth Marshall and Christo Boshoff composed and produced a song about Jensma recounting the death of Can Themba. The song was a cut on an album called *Level*. Mud Ensemble performed the song at the Standard Bank National Festival of the Arts in July. The festival itself is an annual event held in Queens Road, Grahamstown.

Peter Lewis, the founder of another alternative band, 'Mystery Roach' was also inspired by Jensma's poetry. 'Mystery Roach' was from Benoni in Gauteng. Their song, 'trains a-comin'' drew its lyrics from Jensma's poem 'in memoriam Ben Zwane'.

By 1989, Jensma's publishers took to sending Michael Gardiner his post. In the same year, when the driver from the Salvation Army came to fetch Jensma for his treatment at Johannesburg General Hospital he was nowhere to be found. Jensma's 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 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 and Guardian* published a report claiming that Jensma could possibly be alive. This created much excitement that perhaps some sign of him had been discover-

ed, but there was no information of him forthcoming.

In May 1999, friends of Jensma—Colin Smuts, Walter Saunders, Wolf Weinek and Michael Gardiner—met with Jensma's two daughters to discuss the establishment of a Wopko Jensma Trust. Jensma's son had died of Aids in 1997. It was agreed to set up a trust into which would go the remaining royalties from the sale of his poetry collections, donations as well as the ongoing income from international anthologies and translations of his work (Gardiner 2000).

To date, Jensma has not been pronounced officially dead. N.M. Singer wrote the following unpublished poem about Jensma's disappearance entitled 'Desperately seeking Wopko':

You are as lost to this fractured land
and its sightless citizens
as I am to myself
I glimpse your face
in those of children
stolen away
by those vapours they inhale
And in the myriad beings pressing on
to some empty toil.
I thought I saw you
on a crowded night time sidewalk
Alone
Hands eloquently poised
Snarling at the moon
I turn and walk away
The dust and oily sweet smell of impending rain
dancing in my nostrils (2001).

Perhaps Jensma could be better understood by his comments in an undated letter to Peter Horn:

If I have put forward ideas: it means nothing. I have no life—no philosophy, I only live for the love of living. Up to now, it seems, nobody has yet grasped Einstein's eclipse, well, tell me, what really matters in this chaos of worlds?

Edwin Mellon Post-doctoral Fellow
University of Natal

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