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Issue 129 March 2010 

## New Canons

ART HISTORY

The re-writing of art history in South Africa

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by Sean O'Toole

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Wopko Jensma, *i must show you my clippings* (1977)

It is 1973. In Northern England, three youths name their experiment in electronic sound after a club established in Zurich 57 years earlier – Cabaret Voltaire. In South Africa, where a racially divided underground is engrossed by psychedelic rock and free jazz, a 34-year-old poet, Wopko Jensma, publishes his debut collection, *Sing for Our Execution*. His poems are blunt, tortured, incantatory; they invoke the rhythms of Thelonious Monk, Dollar Brand and Kippie Moeketsi in a mix of English and Afrikaans, Jensma's native tongue: 'i am white and brutal,' offers the poet, 'i come to you after death / and leave you completely deserted'.

Jensma's book includes some of his linoprints – abstracted forms which echo the work of Hans Arp and Cecil Skotnes, an influential figure from South African art's postwar search for authenticity and

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
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form. The anthology is well received; a second follows, *Where White is the Colour, Where Black is the Number* (1975). Literary acclaim beckons. Jensma resists. 'i don't want that suburban house,' he writes in his Dada-inspired third collection, *i must show you my clippings* (1977), 'i don't want a second car / a swimming pool a lawn a boring Sunday.' His wish becomes fact. In 1993 Jensma disappeared from the Johannesburg homeless shelter where he lived.

Jensma, Neil Goedhals, Thami Mnyele, Lucas Seage: much remains unsaid, unknown and forgotten about the story of contemporary African art, despite the frequency with which it is now written about – in saccharine biographies, helpful monographs, pop compilations and earnest histories. As an exercise, turn to the index of *South African Art Now* (2009), artist and writer Sue Williamson's survey of five decades of South African art. You'll find no reference to Jensma, or to the painter and post-punk provocateur Goedhals, or to Seage, whose death in 2009 completed a quartet of burials that started with Mnyele's assassination in 1985. Ditto US art historian John Pepper's *Art and the End of Apartheid* (2009), a thoroughly researched historical survey that attempts to explore the roots of 'an oppositional, non-racial aesthetic practice' – he only mentions Mnyele.

Canons, of course, are mutable things. For many years, Esmé Berman's *Art & Artists of South Africa* (1970), a dictionary of mostly white painters, defined the South African canon (it still does for the country's archly conservative auction houses and their white patrons). The publication of Williamson's *Resistance Art in South Africa* (1989), followed in 1996 by *Art in South Africa – the Future Present*, challenged this hegemony; her new book actualizes the passing of power from one set of texts to another.

There is nothing dubious in this. Plainly, any good piece of historical writing will critique the status quo in its re-imagining of the past. As Ian Buruma, in his account of postwar denial in Germany and Japan, *The Wages of Guilt* (1994), offers: 'To catch truth there must be conflict, debate, interpretation, and reinterpretation – in short, a discourse without end.' Which is where Kathryn Smith and Roger van Wyk come in. The former, a well-respected artist and academic, who in 2007 compiled a book of essays on the African avant-garde, *One Million and Forty-Four Years (And Sixty-Three Days)*, the latter inspired by Seage and his neo-Dadaist assemblages to study art, Smith and Van Wyk recently curated a historical survey that reflected on the impact of Dada in South Africa.

Hosted by Cape Town's National Gallery, 'Dada South?' presented



canonical Dada figures including Arp, Hannah Höch, Marcel Janco and Man Ray alongside Goedhals, Jensma and Seage; Candice Breitz, Kendell Geers and Robin Rhode. The question mark of the exhibition's title underscored the show's speculative nature; it sought to formulate 'an alternative history of resistance in a culture of isolation and repression, one that intersects with the canon of resistance art, but which deviates into forms that are less didactic, more eclectic and experimental'. The outcome was fascinating, thrilling even, for its sustained focus, but also inevitably dubious.

'Dada South?' forms part of a growing list of curatorial projects intrigued by lacunae and exclusion in African art history, and the rewriting thereof. Some are continental in focus; others, like 'ReVisions' (2005), regional in scope. A project initiated by Bruce Campbell Smith, 'ReVisions' recoups the story of black South African artists active since the 1920s. In the catalogue, editor Hayden Proud points out that Campbell Smith's collection 'is perhaps more notable for what it excludes than it includes' – an insight equally true of the Italian venture capitalist Jean Pigozzi's collection of contemporary African art.

An extensive holding of around 40 African artists, Pigozzi's collection is showcased in the book *Arts of Africa* (2005). 'It makes me feel like a global attaché culturel for all of Sub-Saharan Africa,' Pigozzi crowns in the book's introduction, an illumination of his woolly epistemological views as a collector – he eschews North African and white South African artists. By comparison, Okwui Enwezor and Chika Okeke-Agulu possess a far more inclusive understanding of African creative production; they regard Africa less as a bounded geographical construct than an imaginative point of origin. Published late last year, *Contemporary African Art Since 1980* presents a multi-ethnic, diasporic and multi-disciplinary reading of recent practice bounded, burdened and emboldened by its definition as 'African'. As a complement, I recommend Sylvester Ogbechie's biography, *Ben Enwonwu: The Making of an African Modernist* (2008). In his recovery of this pioneering Nigerian painter, Ogbechie tells us that we don't know the artist because ultimately Enwonwu 'fell victim to postcolonial avant-garde space-clearing gestures'. There is, perhaps, a lesson in this.

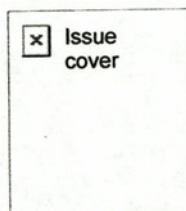
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