

Heritage-making as artistic practice? Mateusz Okoński's cabinet of curiosities as fleeting heritage¹

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Is it possible to create heritage through artistic practice? The authors ask this question through the perspective of the work of Mateusz Okoński, a Polish mid-career artist and exhibition designer whose passion for collecting has resulted in the creation of a cabinet of curiosities at his private apartment in Kraków. The discussion in the article encompasses the practice of the collection's creation, the temporality of the objects and the collection itself, the authenticity of the cabinet of curiosities, and also the various multi-sensory narratives which are offered by the artist to those who visit his salon. The authors investigate whether such collecting and the resulting cabinet of curiosities comprises heritage or whether it is merely an act of collecting historic objects, and conclude that heritage-making can be the result of artistic practice.

Keywords: heritage-making, cabinet of curiosities, Mateusz Okoński, contemporary art

Wisława Szymborska, a Polish poet who was awarded the 1996 Nobel Prize in Literature, captured the essence of passing time in her poem *The Three Oddest Words*, which offers a brilliant point of reference for discussing the passage of time with regards to objects of art:

When I pronounce the word Future,
the first syllable already belongs to the past.

When I pronounce the word Silence,
I destroy it.

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When I pronounce the word Nothing,
I make something no non-being can hold.²

Temporality is inherent in the nature of works of art, just like all other objects of material culture. Any attempts at conservation may only delay the inevitable process of decay; furthermore, any documentation – also limited by material forms, be they physical or digital – is nothing more than an imperfect endeavour to capture a fleeting moment. The aspect of ‘fleeting’ time here refers to the objects of the past, as well as contemporary practices of their arrangement and curation; these will be our points of reference for discussion in this article.

Can heritage be made through artistic practice? This is the main research question we raise, addressing it from the perspective of Mateusz Okoński, an internationally acclaimed Polish middle-generation artist, collector, antiquarian and exhibition designer. His artistic practice defies classification. As an artist, he combines cultural codes, the material of his art is often exhibition design, and the heart of his artistic work is a huge collection that makes up a contemporary cabinet of curiosities, which is also – as in modern times – the home of an erudite collector. Okoński’s approach to objects of material culture is grounded in the tradition of cabinets of curiosities and antiquarian knowledge; combined with the application of curatorial and artistic methods, it justifies the hypothesis that heritage-making could be the effect of artistic practice. His cabinet of curiosities is simultaneously a work of art, a curatorial project, a collection, a living space and an immersive backdrop for the artist’s social life.

Discussion in the article encompasses the practice of the creation of the collection, where objects come and go, and may be dispersed after the death of the collector. It brings forward the issue of the inevitable decay of objects, which progresses with time despite all conservation efforts. Finally, it addresses the aspect of dormant objects which stand still, coming to life only when the collector manipulates them with his hands and tells an accompanying narrative – that is, tells a story.

Is the cabinet of curiosities created by Okoński heritage per se? Or is it rather an artistic project in the guise of antiquarian practice? Or perhaps he means only to deceive us, only giving a mere illusion of heritage? Okoński has a deep personal connection with the collection’s objects, despite their seeming randomness – be they geographical, temporal and typological differences inherent to the cabinet of curiosities. He seeks out items for it, ultimately making a selection based on found objects which have value and meaning among a mass of other items; this fact, in turn, provides an argument for considering this project as heritage-making. This is heritage as process, as it develops and grows together with the collector–artist and morphs according to his changing worldview, ideas and discoveries. Okoński is the one to make this heritage, but there is also a community which witnesses its development: members of the unofficial salon of Cracovian social life.

The article is enriched with audio samples which present a fleeting aural aspect of the collection. The sounds of objects, as well as the collector’s narrative, were recorded with a set of ambisonic and stereophonic microphones during two location study visits to the collector’s apartments (all audio samples in this paper are from Okoński’s most recent residence).

² SZYMBORSKA, Wisława. *The Three Oddest Words*. 1996. Translated by S. Baranczak and C. Cavanagh. NobelPrize.org. Nobel Prize Outreach AB 2024. <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1996/szymborska/poetry/> (Accessed 30 December 2024).

Audio excerpt 1: *Field recording sequence of urban soundscape in the vicinity of Mateusz Okoński's apartment in Kraków, followed by subsequent entry into the cabinet of curiosities. Recorded 24 April 2024. Audio link (MP3): <http://bit.ly/3Dzft0uR>*

Theory of heritage-making and situating artistic practice in this process

Heritage-making is a process that defies definition, just as heritage itself is devoid of sharply defined boundaries. Smith goes so far as to write that there is “no such thing as heritage”.³ According to the classic definition by Graham and Ashworth, “heritage is that part of the past which we select in the present for contemporary purposes, whether they be economic or cultural (including political and social factors) and choose to bequeath to a future.”⁴ Heritage is relative, subjective and ever-changing. My heritage does not necessarily need to be your heritage. Likewise, my heritage today may not be somebody else’s tomorrow.

As Ashworth, Graham and J. E. Tunbridge put it, “heritage is present-centred and is created, shaped and managed by, and in response to, the demands of the present. As such, it is open to constant revision and change and is also both a source and a repercussion of social conflict.”⁵ In other words, according to Harvey, heritage “can be found, interpreted, given meanings, classified, presented, conserved, and lost again, and again and again within any age.”⁶

Furthermore, heritage is a narrative or story which accompanies objects, sites or rituals. It is much more than an object itself – “heritage is less about tangible material artefacts or other intangible forms of the past than about the meanings placed upon them and the representations which are created from them.”⁷

Much like storytelling, heritage is not static and given in a form that lasts unchanged, but is a process⁸ to which change is an inherent characteristic. The cabinet of curiosities, as an archive of concealed narratives, undergoes numerous performances – it is “both the act of remaining and a means of appearance”⁹, with every performance slightly altering both the cabinet and the stories contained therein.

With this in mind, the cabinet of curiosities does not constitute an archive as such, in the understanding of Merewether, who contests that “The archive is not one and the same as forms of remembrance, or as history”¹⁰. Although Okoński’s collection does constitute a “repository”, it is not necessarily “the foundation from which history is written” – instead, it is the performative act of archive creation, the active demonstration of the cabinet by the artist/collector, which provides the narrative and which is the undertaking of heritage performance in this instance.

Harvey writes that “heritage is about the process by which people use the past.”¹¹ Moreover, according to Smith “Heritage is about negotiation – about using the past, and

³ SMITH, Laurajane. *Uses of heritage*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006, p. 11.

⁴ GRAHAM, Brian J. and ASHWORTH, Gregory (eds.) *Senses of place: senses of time*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2006, p. 7.

⁵ ASHWORTH, Gregory, GRAHAM, Brian J., TUNBRIDGE, J. E. (eds.) *Pluralising pasts: heritage, identity and place in multicultural societies*. London: Pluto Press, 2007, p. 3.

⁶ HARVEY, David C. The History of Heritage. In: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*. Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds.) Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008, pp. 22.

⁷ ASHWORTH, GRAHAM, and TUNBRIDGE, *Pluralising pasts...*, p. 3.

⁸ SMITH, *Uses of heritage*, p. 3; ASHWORTH, Gregory J. Preservation, Conservation and Heritage. Approaches to the Past in the Present through the Built Environment. In: *Asian Anthropology* 10(1), 2011, p. 2.

⁹ SCHNEIDER, Rebecca. Performance Remains. In: *Performance Research* (6)2, 2001.

¹⁰ MEREWETHER, Charles (ed.) *The Archive*. Whitechapel, 2006, p. 10.

¹¹ HARVEY, *The History of Heritage...*, p. 19.

collective or individual memories, to negotiate new ways of being and expressing identity.”¹² This demonstrates how heritage is dynamic. Smith furthermore indicates that “Heritage is a multilayered performance – be this a performance of visiting, managing, interpretation or conservation – that embodies acts of remembrance and commemoration while negotiating and constructing a sense of place.”¹³

Heritage comes to life when it involves activities relating to it. Heritage needs to be experienced;¹⁴ it affects our way of thinking, creates emotions and develops engagement.

The product or the consequences of heritage activities, the emotions and experiences and the memories of them that they create, and while these then work to facilitate a sense of identity and belonging it is not all they do. What are also created, and continually recreated (rather than simply “maintained”), are social networks and relations that themselves bind and create a sense of belonging and identity... [H]eritage provides a mentality and discourse in which ... linkages [to the past] are forged and recast.¹⁵

Mateusz Okoński’s artistic practice – firmly grounded at the intersection of collecting, the antiquarian market and exhibition design – serves as a framework for discussion on the process of heritagisation and answering the question of whether heritage can be made as artistic practice.

According to Carter et al.,

The process of heritagisation ... describes the invocation of hitherto unvalorised aspects of the past, through the acts of collection, listing, interpretation and commodification into an asset in any given present. Heritagisation views heritage as a form of cultural production and communication; a making and remaking of meaning and an ongoing negotiation between memory, identity and space.¹⁶

In this article we turn to Mateusz Okoński and his work with historic objects, discussing the heritage dimension of the entire process. Contemporary art and heritage is a connection which surfaces from time to time in artistic and curatorial practices in the form of interventions in historic spaces and various forms which embody an interpretation of the past. Cass et al. observe that:

To place an artwork that is articulated as “contemporary” in a location which is defined as “heritage”, is to set up a temporal dialogue in which the “pastness” of the one, and the “nowness” of the other become emphasised, despite the fact that the experience is a contemporaneous unfolding of an artwork, heritage and viewer relationship.¹⁷

¹² SMITH, *Uses of heritage...*, p. 4.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 47.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 83–84.

¹⁶ CARTER, Thomas, HARVEY, David C., JONES, Roy and ROBERTSON, Iain J. M. Introduction. In: *Creating Heritage. Unrecognised Pasts and Rejected Futures*. Thomas Carter, David C. Harvey, Roy Jones and Iain J. M. Robertson (eds.) Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, p. 2.

¹⁷ CASS, Nick, PARK, Gill and POWELL, Anna. Introduction. In: *Contemporary Art in Heritage Spaces*. Nick Cass, Gill Park and Anna Powell (eds.) Abingdon: Routledge, 2020, p. 3.

The temporal dialogue mentioned here may be construed as a keyword for all processes, including Mateusz Okoński's, whose contemporary practice is the result of the choices he makes to select historic items, as well as the exhibition designs which he puts to the test in his apartment to display them.

An artist has the right to name things, to call up worlds, to mix fact and fiction, to blur the truth and question reality. He is allowed more freedom than an antiquarian. An artist also creates collections which are built from objects, experiences and stories. By creating his cabinet of curiosities, by being constantly at its centre, and by creating relationships and meanings, Okoński enters into a dialogue with a great tradition dating back to the sixteenth-century collections of rulers, magnates, intellectuals and scientists – and, ultimately, the beginning of museums and their evolution to the present day.

Can an artist bring heritage into existence? According to Ashworth et al.:

Not only does heritage have many uses but it also has multiple producers, both public–private, official–non-official and insider–outside, each having varied and multiple objectives in the creation and management of heritage.¹⁸

On the one end there are big players: public institutions, international organisations, governments and the “authorised heritage discourse”. Smith, who authored the preceding term, writes that the authorised heritage discourse “is reliant on the power/knowledge claims of technical and aesthetic experts, and institutionalised in state cultural agencies and amenity societies.”¹⁹ This process of heritagisation is a top-down one which “privileges monumentality and grand scale, innate artefact/site significance tied to time depth, scientific/aesthetic expert judgement/social consensus and nation building”²⁰. On the other end there is what Robertson calls “heritage from below”,²¹ in reference to a bottom-up or grassroots process. It is here that an artist such as Okoński can be situated.

Drawing on the widely accepted view that heritage is a social and cultural construct firmly embedded in the power relationships that structure society, this perspective relies on the recognition of the possibility of the expression of alternative forms of heritage that “work” from below and within, conceived for, from and by local communities with minimal professional help from without. Such heritages ... interact more readily with identity at a local rather than national scale.²²

Carter et al. add that “Heritage from below has sought to empower communities and to give them a voice in how their cultures are manifested within heritage discourses.”²³ However, the concept of heritage in itself does not entail a top-down/bottom-up, privileged/community perspective but only addresses its universality.

¹⁸ ASHWORTH, GRAHAM, and TUNBRIDGE, *Pluralising pasts...*, p. 2.

¹⁹ SMITH, *Uses of heritage...*, p. 11.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²¹ ROBERTSON, Iain J. M. *Heritage from Below: Class, Social Protest and Resistance*. In: *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity*. Brian Graham and Peter Howard (eds.) Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2008.

²² ROBERTSON, *Heritage from Below...*, p. 143.

²³ CARTER, HARVEY, JONES, and ROBERTSON, *Creating Heritage...*, p. 8.

We will refer to the artist, who takes historic items and builds a narrative around them, asking whether his activities are indeed heritage-making, after examining more closely the nature of his artistic practice and the temporal aspect of its existence.

Mateusz Okoński's cabinet of curiosities created in dialogue with historic cabinets

Mateusz Okoński's apartment has been intentionally arranged as a *Kunst- und Wunderkammer* (chamber of arts and curiosities) to be lived in. The entire space is filled with objects which are presented in showcases, cabinets and wardrobes. In addition to this, artefacts are piled up on counters, desks and coffee tables, all surrounded by historic chairs. Works of art in the entrance hall are arranged much like a gallery exhibition, while on the walls, in the rooms and in the kitchen, the artist has amassed glassware, metalwork, jewellery, books and documents, games, historic objects of daily household use and militaria, as well as ethnographic objects representative of various cultures from across the globe.

Okoński was trained as a visual artist and became successful not only in this field but also as a designer of exhibitions and displays for galleries and museums, as well as commercial spaces. His passion for collecting, however, connects all aspects of his life, making him a professional antiquarian and artist incorporating historic objects into his art. When recounting his collecting interests, he uses the term “cabinet of curiosities” even in reference to his childhood room which he filled with objects brought from street markets:

I was building a certain scenography which constructed a certain story, a narrative. This changed as I got older – obviously – as I had more opportunities to buy better objects.²⁴

Historic objects have always played a crucial role in his life. He brought this fascination from his family home, developing it when museums and antiquarian shops played a seminal role during his formative years. He recollects how he was learning about the quality and value of objects by wandering around the city:

Two churches, three museums every day... From ten o'clock we went through all the branches of the National Museum [in Kraków] and would wind up at the Czartoryski Museum where we could sleep on the sofa. In general, we led a parallel life in the [city's] museums.²⁵

Apart from this, he adds that “going to antique shops, going to flea markets, holding these objects very quickly allowed me to learn to simply identify these objects, to know what is a fake, what is not”.²⁶ His college education was complemented by an understanding of the continuity of eras and styles and the artificiality of the divisions between ancient, modern and contemporary art. He stresses that only during his university education did he fully understand there are no divisions, and that each period of art was contemporary at some point.

Audio excerpt 2: *Mateusz Okoński gives an introduction to his cabinet of curiosities. Recorded 24 April 2024. Audio link (MP3): <https://bit.ly/3DyGSWe>*

²⁴ OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 29 October 2024.

²⁵ Ibidem.

²⁶ Ibidem.

During the process of creating the first iterations of his cabinet of curiosities while still at art school, Okoński began to shift his attention from “naturabilia” to “esoterica”, leading to a certain “fetishisation” of objects which have “their own rich, symbolic, meaningful and mystic language”²⁷. In creating his collection, Okoński knows that he is part of an ongoing tradition of cabinets of curiosities, to which he then attributes his own particular narrative and symbolism. As the cabinet’s custodian, it is up to him to divulge – or conceal – the cabinet’s ultimate meaning.

As visual artists we are custodians of ... secret knowledge, and the secret knowledge here is the knowledge of the symbol, ... the ability to ... use the language of objects, or the visual language of objects. ... So when you start to use this language, you start to understand it deeply and you look at it holistically, because that’s also the power of the cabinet of curiosities, that it’s actually the first museum, or the first panopticon, or the first encyclopaedia of some objects ... it’s an attempt to catalogue, to study their meaning, their mysticism, their symbolism, their language.²⁸

Mateusz Okoński’s private collection has been amassed as a cabinet of curiosities, much like a treasury or a modern museum, conceived to prolong the life of precious objects and keep them for posterity. In the sixteenth century, erudites, scholars and those who wielded power began to arrange the peculiarities of the surrounding world into original wholes. In this way, cabinets of curiosities were created, with the ambition to become microcosms, libraries of knowledge immersed in objects which comprise comprehensive readings on nature, culture and the humanities.

According to Samuel Quiccheberg, author of the influential treatise on museography of 1565, an ideal museum is a “theatre of the broadest scope, containing authentic materials and precise reproductions of the whole of universe.”²⁹ This thought refers broadly to collections, which according to Pomian’s definition is “any assemblage of natural objects or products of human activity, maintained temporarily or permanently outside the area of economic activity, subjected to special care in an enclosed place adapted for that purpose and on display for viewing.”³⁰

Cabinets of curiosities, known in German as *Kunst- und Wunderkammern*, are a phenomenon mostly of the second half of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, having faded away in the eighteenth century. They represent the world in a nutshell, combining nature with culture, including masterpieces, extraordinary items, oddities and marvels which amazed both intellectually and aesthetically.

The arrangements of objects, which was an integral part of the idea of cabinets, implies that the aim was systematisation and order. Mauriès writes that the historic cabinets of curiosities had a twofold character:

their intention was not merely to define, discover and possess the rare and the unique, but also, and at the same time, to inscribe them within a special setting which would instil in

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ Ibidem.

²⁹ MAURIÈS, Patrick. *Cabinets of Curiosities*. Thames & Hudson, 2022, p. 23.

³⁰ POMIAN, Krzysztof. *Zbieracze i osobliwości. Paryż–Wenecja XVI–XVII wiek*. Translated by Andrzej Pieńkoś. Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, 2012, p. 18. Own translations into English in the article.

them layers of meaning. Display panels, cabinets, cases and drawers were a response not only to a desire to preserve, or to conceal from view, but also to a parallel impulse to slot each item into its place in a vast network of meanings and correspondences.³¹

Being part of a bigger whole made way for new connections, interpretations and references, and thus for the production of new knowledge and the creation of new aesthetic arrangements. The location of one object among other objects representing various types, times and cultures encourages new interpretations.

Pomian associates the creation of cabinets of curiosities with the development of new attitudes towards the invisible sphere, starting in the second half of the fourteenth century.³² It was manifested in collecting antiquities and, later, in reaching out to foreign realms, where travellers

returning from distant lands, expeditions bring back not only highly profitable goods, but also brand new knowledge. And also new semiophores. Textiles, goldsmith's wares, porcelain, feather costumes, "idols", "fetishes", samples of flora and fauna, shells and stones all flow in large numbers into the offices of rulers and scholars. These objects, irrespective of their original purpose, have become semiophores in Europe because they are collected not for their utilitarian value but for their significance, as they represent the invisible realm: exotic countries, alien societies, strange impressions.³³

Items from exciting new lands were put next to objects acquired locally. As Impey and MacGregor note:

Perhaps in response to a growing awareness of the value of these exotic exhibits as representatives of the societies which produced them, collectors began to take an interest in the formerly unconsidered elements of their own surroundings. Obsolete tools, peasant costumes and other items of local produce began to appear in collections... Equally, scholars began to consider their own natural history in terms other than those in the chase and to describe and collect items where possible.³⁴

Coming back to Quiccheberg's theatrical reference, Mauriès indicates that, unlike modern museums, cabinets of curiosities invited active viewing, including the element of physically opening a door or drawer of a piece of furniture.

The first impression on entering a cabinet of curiosities was one of a world in miniature, an accumulation of objects in such profusion that it was difficult to find one's way round it; there was no beginning and no end. But the visitor was then expected to open the cupboards and the drawers and to examine each object in detail.³⁵

³¹ MAURIÈS, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, p. 25.

³² POMIAN, *Zbieracze i osobliwości...*, p. 48–51.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 51.

³⁴ IMPEY, Oliver and MACGREGOR, Arthur. Introduction. In: *The Origins of Museums. The Cabinet of Curiosities in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Europe*. Oliver Impey and Arthur MacGregor (eds.) Oxford: Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford, 2017, p. 2.

³⁵ MAURIÈS, *Cabinets of Curiosities*, p. 69.

Countless collections began to multiply and amaze and inspire those who viewed them, but only a few survived in the form given to them by their creators. Objects pass from hand to hand, change owners, become part of different systems and different stories. They are constantly on the move, losing some of their materiality and gaining new, intangible layers.

Audio excerpt 3: *Mateusz Okoński describes the interior of a wardrobe which has been adapted for use in the cabinet of curiosities, with the artist labelling some of his objects as the “Holy Grail”. Recorded 24 April 2024. Audio link (MP3): <https://bit.ly/4a6zCgI>*

Okoński has joined this ongoing cycle, taking over objects that other collectors had before him. He is the heir of modern intellectuals and collectors who laid the foundations for the modern museum. His creative method is arrangement, the creation of a personal cabinet of curiosities in Baroque dressing and through Enlightenment and Positivist frames.

Some cabinets of curiosities gave rise to museums, and in this way, the context and nature of the collections changed dramatically. Museums by definition attempt to offer objects they possess an eternal duration. A private collection, in turn, may be viewed as a generational relay race, taking over – if only for a moment – objects which had previously belonged to other collectors. The struggle with temporality, then, is at least twofold, as it regards the materiality of the object and integrity of the collection.

The cabinet of curiosities is a closed entity with objects extrapolated from the outside world and given fantastic connections – and in this way, completely new meanings. As a result, cabinets and museums are very much alike; it is simply the scale which is often incomparable. The metaphor of museum as temple is often used for a museum which holds sacred objects – a reliquary of sorts. Associations with temples are emphasised by architecture, drawing on the style of Ancient Greek and Roman temples. Objects in a temple are symbolically given eternal duration, immortality; however, nothing can stop decay. Conservation can delay the process of ageing, but it cannot halt it altogether.

Yet despite the objects’ decay, “Memory is life”, writes Pierre Nora, adding that it “is a perpetually actual phenomenon”, in juxtaposition to history, which Nora underlines as “a reconstruction ... of what is no longer.”³⁶ Okoński’s cabinet may be construed as a rewriting of history, becoming subject to the narrative tropes of the artist’s whim, feeding the performance of heritage and thus denying it a death, unlike the demise of memory, whose “delegating to the archive”³⁷ means that the archive itself becomes “the deliberate and calculated secretion of lost memory.”³⁸

However, for all this speak of life, a museum not only gives immortality but also condemns to death. Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1909) compared a museum with a cemetery in 1909 in the Manifesto of Futurism, where he wrote: “Museums: cemeteries! ... Museums: public

³⁶ NORA, Pierre. Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire. In: *Representations* 26, Special Issue: Memory and Counter-Memory, 1989, p. 8.

³⁷ Ibidem, p. 13.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 14.

dormitories”.³⁹ Theodor Adorno wrote: “Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. Museums are like the family sepulchres of works of art.”⁴⁰

Life outside context may not be called life. Museum collections are suspended between life and death, as deaccession is rarely possible. However, when a museum ceases to exist, then its collections may be allocated across other museums and in this way may lose integrity. A private collection, in turn, does not have this limitation – objects may come and go, although the core collection usually stays intact. Uncertainty arises when the collector is gone, disappears, or dies. What will happen to Okoński’s collection? The most precious core will most likely stay in the artist’s family, while the rest of the objects will probably go back to the market to continue their journey.

In 2024, Okoński’s cabinet of curiosities was reassembled and installed in a new apartment space, according to new ideas, using partially new material. The arrangement of the old apartment, a five minute walk away, is no longer extant. It is only present in a handful of photographs from various artistic and social events, as well as being caught in the audio sphere. Installations in the new apartment offer a new opening to the collection. This location, however, may also be temporary. The change, as the artist sees it, is inherent in the process of growing.

Can heritage be made as artistic practice?

The first question to pose before attempting to answer the main question of this article should be: what makes Mateusz Okoński’s cabinet of curiosities heritage?

Following the definition of heritage, Okoński selects historic objects – representing various eras, geographies and qualities of the cultural and natural worlds – and incorporates them into his collection by situating them in a dialogue with already assembled objects. His choices are grounded on his individual liking and are not dictated by the historic representation of the collection and the necessity to fill the gaps in order to build a fuller whole; they are rather driven by personal taste, aesthetic qualities and the stories which the objects convey.

Okoński is the one making decisions, and – it needs to be stressed – they are taken on an individual basis. The artist runs a social salon, with gatherings taking place in the centre of the cabinet of curiosities. His visitors – artists, intellectuals, researchers and politicians – become regular viewers and disputants not only in the cabinet but also of the cabinet; however, this party has no influence on the shape or content of it. Furthermore, the salon located within the cabinet introduces the issue of interplay between the private and public sphere. Okoński’s cabinet is his most private sphere, spreading across the hallways, living room, bedroom, kitchen and bathroom. These spaces become either a focal point or a backdrop, depending on the occasion and the invited party, of various gatherings. Finally, there is a similarity with a traditional salon, simply taking place in a historic interior decorated with antiques, as well as with a session held in the artist’s studio, among his artworks. The cabinet of curiosities created by the artist as a work of art brings an additional layer to the heritage called to life by the artist.

Okoński’s authority organises the entire cabinet. Is it justified, however, that heritage is made by an individual? No definition opposes such action. If we look at his practice from the angle of intangible heritage, with the creation of the cabinets of curiosities being a continuation

³⁹ MARINETTI, Filippo Tommaso. *Fondazione e manifesto del futurismo*. Pubblicato dal “Figaro” di Parigi il 20 Febbraio 1909. https://www.loc.gov/resource/gdcwdl.wdl_20024/?sp=2&st=pdf&r=-0.186%2C-0.069%2C1.373%2C1.373%2C0&pdfPage=1 (Accessed 30 December 2024).

⁴⁰ ADORNO, Theodor W. *Prisms*. Translated by Samuel and Shierry Weber. London: Neville Spearman, 1967, p. 175.

of protomuseum of the modern-era practice, we find the UNESCO “Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage” which states that

“intangible cultural heritage” means the practices, representations, expressions, knowledge, skills – as well as the instruments, objects, artefacts and cultural spaces associated therewith – that communities, groups and, in some cases, individuals recognise as part of their cultural heritage.⁴¹

Okoński’s creation is not just a mere compilation of historic objects, but a work of art in its own right:

It certainly is a work of art, in the language of contemporary or modern art, it is an object, it is a place, it is an installation. In fact, the apartment has become a gallery naturally filled with certain objects which intuitively create still lifes. They are created everywhere when I buy something new or create combinations that fascinate me. As well as being an art installation, the flat naturally becomes a laboratory. What makes me different from a normal collector is that I test certain lighting or textile solutions in my apartment–cabinet and then attempt to transfer them to exhibitions that I design or curate.⁴²

Okoński’s cabinet constitutes a thematically arranged exhibition, divided into sections (he calls them still lifes) enclosed in cabinets, vitrines, wardrobes and on tables. It has a semi-permanent character. When new objects are added to the collection, they are given space among already existing connections and automatically change the existing matrix. A change of residence also happens from time to time, the most recent of which took place in 2023, resulting in a move from a 45m² apartment to one that was almost 100m². This addition of space marked an occasion for rearrangement and the introduction of new curatorial ideas.

Audio excerpt 4: *Mateusz Okoński explains how his cabinet of curiosities grows organically. Recorded 24 April 2024. Audio link (MP3): <https://bit.ly/4a1xNBp>*

The artist–collector not only enters into the tradition of historic cabinets of curiosities but at the same time is a continuator of artistic practice performed by various contemporary artists who, before Okoński, turned to the tradition of cabinets of curiosities. Okoński needs to be situated alongside Andy Warhol (*Raid the Icebox I with Andy Warhol*, 1970; *Time Capsules*, 1974), Joseph Beuys (*Block Beuys*, 1970), Christian Boltanski (*Vitrine de référence*, 1971), Herbert Distel (*Museum of drawers*, 1970–1977), Claes Oldenburg (*The Mouse Museum*, 1972), Daniel Spoerri (*Musée Sentimental*, 1977), Ann Hamilton (*Between taxonomy and communion*, 1990), Karsten Bott (*One of each*, 1993), Georgina Starr (*Nine Collections of the Seventh Museum*, 1994), Claudio Costa (*Ontologia antologica*, 1994) and Mark Dion’s artistic practice (e.g. *Cabinet of curiosities for the Wexner Center for the Arts*, 1997). These and many other contemporary artists’ activities are at the intersection of collecting, the systematisation of objects, and the museum as an institution which protects, researches and exhibits historic items within a specific formal framework. Artists comment on the condition and value of objects, which are in turn withheld from their

⁴¹ Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Paris, 17 October 2003. In: *Basic Texts of the 2003 Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage*. Paris: UNESCO. 2024, p. 5.

⁴² OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 29 October 2024.

original environments, while the agency of a museum imposes a new interpretational layer, turning all items into works of art devoid of their original function, just as Pomian comments:

Even if they had a certain utility in their previous incarnation, they lose it as museum objects or as components of a collection. They thus become similar to works of art, devoid of utilitarian purpose because they are produced to decorate people, palaces, temples, apartments, gardens, streets, squares and cemeteries.⁴³

Discussing the practice of contemporary artists who work with collections and discuss issues surrounding collecting, Putnam notes:

Since the late 1960s, many artists have exhibited their personal collections as an entity or a “museum”.... The results may be personal, biographical or fictional in character, and the style of presentation may contain elements of parody. The objects are presented with an aura of institutional authority, yet play on the contrast between truth and fantasy in their use of either fake or genuine artifacts.⁴⁴

There are many similarities between Okoński and Dion: work with historic objects is at the core of their artistic practices, both are well versed in the world of *naturalia* and *artificialia*, and both use their artistic flair to comment on the centuries-old tradition of collecting and systematising the world. They both do this by means of historical objects – those collected, as well as the furniture used for their display. Commenting on Dion’s installation, *Bureau of the Centre for the Study of Surrealism and Its Legacy* at the Manchester Museum in 2005, which built its meaning on references to early cabinets of curiosities and to surrealist philosophy, Lucy Bradnock observed that the artist “approaches surrealism not as a historical movement or overarching schema to be followed to the letter, but as a method of discovery that unites scientific investigation and imaginative endeavour to affirm the museum as a place of wonder.”⁴⁵ Despite the sporadic criticism of museums, Dion and Okoński indeed praise their formal frameworks, which, by cataloguing objects and imposing an air of authority, introduce formative tensions, produce new meanings, and give space for dialogues and interpretations.

What makes Okoński’s *œuvre* different from Dion’s and from most other projects which employ historic objects and discuss collections/collecting is that his cabinet of curiosities is an intricate part of his life. He is not creating it for a show in a museum, though he also acts as a curator and displays historic objects from other collections, playing with the museum tradition of display (such as *The Toy Clinic* and *Toy Showcase #3, #4 and #5* for the Toy Museum in Kraków in 2020–2022). Rather, it is his private living space which he opens for view and for his guests to experience in the spirit of traditional salons. Glass vitrines, traditionally used for the presentation of collections, whether in private homes or in museums, comprise an element with their own symbolism. Putnam aptly captures this meaning:

It embodies a very particular display aesthetic which has a singular ability to magically transform the most humble object into something special, unique and generally more attractive or fascinating. Once placed in a vitrine, an object is perceived in a completely different way by the viewer, as compared with when it is viewed in its original context.

⁴³ POMIAN, *Zbieracze i osobliwości...*, p. 15.

⁴⁴ PUTNAM, James. *Art and Artifact. The Museum as Medium*. Second edition. Thames & Hudson, 2009, p. 66.

⁴⁵ BRADNOCK, Lucy. *The Museum and the Marvelous*. In: *Mark Dion: Misadventures of a 21st-Century Naturalist*. Lucy Flint (ed.) Boston: The Institute of Contemporary Art and Yale University Press, 2017, p. 110.

The vitrine functions as a means of protection both from the elements and the spectator, who is thus physically separated from its contents. Almost like a peep-show it seduces, concentrating, looking, staring at the untouchable and the unattainable.⁴⁶

Even though in Okoński's apartment not every still life is enclosed behind glass, there is an invisible line which divides the object from the viewer. Only Okoński is authorised to open the doors and take the objects into his hands. The vitrine appears as a means to suspend time and present patina caused by the passage of time and use of the object, the formation of which is delayed by its placement in a display case. Putnam continues:

The use of the vitrine in science and medicine is linked to the need to keep a specimen in a still viewable, arrested state of being. The practice of preservation of museum exhibits by taxidermy, pickling, dehydration etc. illustrates the desire to suspend time and stabilise objects against decomposition.⁴⁷

Objects locked and staged in vitrines and all other cabinets are “dead” or dormant, waiting until someone awakens them with motion, a story, a sound, or smell. Okoński recalls his annoyance when he used to visit museums in his youth:

I was so terribly annoyed as a child that all these objects were in display cases. My natural curiosity told me to just turn the object over, see it. And I guess that's why I wanted those objects too.... An object in a display case, an object locked up in museums very often dies alone in silence, because it's only the life and the patination, and that trace, and the clash, and the history that gives it meaning, and not simply this confinement in display. That is to say, the sterility of objects doesn't make the slightest bit of sense either.⁴⁸

Audio excerpt 5: *Okoński explains the symbolism of the Bavarian charivari which was worn as a decorative addition to traditional lederbosen. Apart from the artist's narrative, we can also experience the sounds made by the costume jewellery. Recorded 24 April 2024. Audio link (MP3): <https://bit.ly/3VYX6bT>*

Okoński is a performer whose act is an integral part of the cabinet's narrative. He invites us into the microcosm of his cabinet, yet from the moment we enter to experience his collection, we do so on his terms by awaiting instructions: to look, to touch, to listen, to smell.... Apart from immersing ourselves in Okoński's multi-sensory *Wunderkammer*, we are subjected to various narratives of his making (which may or may not be authentic, as is discussed in the following section). However, we are then left with this information to piece our own stories together. The tales with which Okoński regales his visitors are almost mythical, as he himself admits: “it is very common for a collector to mythologise an object, ... we create a narrative, colour a narrative, we create a legend ..., we give objects metaphysical meaning and power” (Okoński, 2024b). The artist here is not the sole narrator in the story of each object: this process starts much earlier, before the artefacts are even sought out. As a collector, it is up to him to lend a narrative to the objects found in the cabinet, in the tradition of collectors before him. Okoński comments:

⁴⁶ PUTNAM, Art and Artifact..., p. 14–15.

⁴⁷ Ibidem, p. 15.

⁴⁸ OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 29 October 2024.

The collector is, in a sense, an archaeologist. He finds a certain object. Depending on who he got it from, he already hears a certain story. If we ask a seller at the flea market or in an antique shop, we get some answer as to who is selling and why. These are usually embellished stories, because no dealer really wants to tell us the truth. Therefore, from all this we begin to build a certain narrative, imagine a certain story. And this is a natural process of objects. The objects are, in a sense, relics. And relics, as we all know, are overgrown with cult and myth. So every collector, when building his or her own reliquary or collection, selects a given item and builds a certain narrative.⁴⁹

As Okoński recounts his stories, visitors do not know whether they are being sold fact or fiction. This is possibly done on purpose. Bedford states that “stories are powerful because they do not fill in all the blanks”⁵⁰ and it is precisely Okoński’s performance in his cabinet of curiosities which allows visitors to create their own thoughts, emotions and connections associated with the collection. In writing on museum narratives, Timpson states that “collections have a wealth of stories to tell. The careful consideration of how to tell those stories is critical in ensuring relevance with intended audiences”.⁵¹ This approach to storytelling provides a point to ponder when deliberating Okoński’s cabinet of curiosities, as he does not open up the cabinet to the general public and is not out to present historical truths, but rather to create a subjective and multisensory story of the cabinet and the objects which comprise the collection.

During a visit to Okoński’s cabinet of curiosities, visitors are not only offered a spoken narrative pertaining to the collection but also find that other senses are triggered throughout this immersive experience. Okoński plays with our sense of smell, with the entire cabinet filled with the smoke of liturgical incense. The resulting atmosphere lends an air of religiosity and mysticism, if not explicitly ecclesiastical in nature. The smell may trigger an olfactory memory⁵² in many visitors, with the cabinet becoming a perfumed metaphor of sorts through the means of implicit memory recollection,⁵³ especially among church-going visitors to Okoński’s cabinet. The resulting odours add an air of gravitas and solemnity, uplifting the artist’s narrative and making visitors feel that the collection is of such value that it is revered through ceremonial incense burning akin to the temples of Antiquity.

The theatricality of Okoński’s narrative performance goes one step further when one takes the soundscape of the cabinet of curiosities into account. A soundscape, as originally prescribed by Schafer in his seminal work *The Tuning of the World* (1994), includes what he calls an “acoustic environment” in which the soundscape “consists of events heard not objects seen”.⁵⁴ Apart from the urban noise of downtown Kraków, which may be heard to varying degrees throughout a journey through the cabinet of curiosities, the actual soundscape of the collection *sensu stricto* is a silent one (although it does not constitute absolute silence) devoid of any events as such. It is here that Okoński enters, enlivening the collection through holding and

⁴⁹ OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 10 June 2024.

⁵⁰ BEDFORD, Leslie. Storytelling: The Real Work of Museums. In: *Curator* 44(1), 2001, p. 29.

⁵¹ TIMPSON, Corey. Storytelling by Design. In: *Storytelling in Museums*. Adina Langer (ed.) London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2022, p. 14.

⁵² WILSON, Donald. *Learning to smell: Olfactory perception from neurobiology to behavior*. Baltimore, Maryland, USA: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.

⁵³ SCHACTER, Daniel. Implicit memory: history and current status. In: *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition* 13(3), 1987, pp. 501–518.

⁵⁴ SCHAFER, R. Murray. *The soundscape: Our sonic environment and the tuning of the world*. Rochester, Vermont, USA: Destiny Books, 1994 (originally published as: *The tuning of the world*. New York: Knopf, 1977), p. 8.

shaking objects – perhaps a kinaesthetic action – and allowing visitors to experience the objects which otherwise lie dormant through a sonic performance. The causality of these events adds an additional sensory layer animating the exhibits,⁵⁵ and these sounds – whether made by rattling a set of “jujus” or clinking some glasses together – enrich the cabinet’s sonosphere and act as additional sonic signifiers which augment Okoński’s narrative spiel.

Audio excerpt 6: *Mateusz Okoński speaks about the contents of a set of drawers (tiroirs) in his cabinet of curiosities. Apart from seeing the artefacts, visitors can hear their sounds as he manipulates them while recounting their story. Recorded 24 April 2024. Audio link (MP3): <https://bit.ly/4gGjW6o>*

Mateusz Okoński awakens objects in his cabinet of curiosities by manipulating them. The resulting sounds add an extra narrative layer to the artist’s storytelling relating to the collection.

Performative elements and holistic multi-sensory experiences markedly differentiate cabinets of curiosities from museums. However, museums, in their pursuit of change and relevance for the contemporary public, also address the senses, test immersiveness and discuss museum prohibitions and orders. Projects where the public is invited to co-create exhibitions break the rule of “no touching” in a direct way. They are not that numerous in museum practice, as for the museum team they are specifically time-consuming (due to the need to take special precautions, teach visitors about the safe handling of objects and assist the public at every stage) and they require courage, openness and flexibility (because the result is uncertain and will not necessarily follow the established curatorial line). However, some museums do decide to work with the public in this in-depth long-term way, including several museums in Poland.⁵⁶ Okoński himself took part in this type of participatory process during realisation of the two-year project *Toy Showcase* by the Toy Museum in Kraków. The museum invited community curators to stage five intimate exhibitions from their collection of historic toys. Okoński’s role was to propose the design of the exhibitions, reflecting the curators’ ideas while also involving them in the process of realisation.

Another question regarding Okoński’s cabinet of curiosities which needs to be raised is: to what extent is it authentic? Authenticity is one of most widely discussed terms in heritage studies, elusive and dynamically changing over the years, seemingly akin to the notion of “heritage”. In common parlance, according to the *Dictionary of Museology*, the term refers to an “object’s realness, legitimacy, fidelity, faithfulness and integrity”.⁵⁷ Authenticity is directly connected to the restoration of monuments, which, as Alois Riegl defined it, either represents the “newness value” – trying to return the appearance of the object to its original state “where authenticity was sensed in an experience of the work as it would have been when the work was first made”⁵⁸ – or to “age value” and “historical value”, which accept that objects change over the years and “engage with [a] sedimentological understanding of authenticity, whereby each layer of history deposited on an object becomes part of it”.⁵⁹

Authenticity became an important element of international documents regarding restoration: the Venice Charter of 1964 on conservation and restoration of monuments and sites underlined

⁵⁵ BUBARIS, Nikos. Sound in museums – museums in sound. In: *Museum Management and Curatorship* 29(4), 2014.

⁵⁶ See JAGODZIŃSKA, Katarzyna. *Participation and the Post-Museum*. Abingdon: Routledge, 2025.

⁵⁷ CASTRIOTA, Brian, PETERS F. Renata, MARÇAL, Hélia and AUFFRET, Stephanie. Authenticity. In: *Dictionary of Museology*. François Mairesse (ed.) Abingdon: Routledge, 2023, p. 37.

⁵⁸ CASTRIOTA, PETERS MARÇAL, and AUFFRET, Authenticity..., p. 38.

⁵⁹ Ibidem, p. 38.

respect when modifying a building and the need to differentiate authentic structures from later additions. The later Nara Document on Authenticity of 1994 followed this same reasoning. Labadi remarks that the Nara Document also “acknowledged that most historic buildings are altered by the actions of nature and their day-to-day use and that these changes are part of their historic stratification and contribute to their value.”⁶⁰ For our discussion here, the restoration of buildings may seem irrelevant, but it is, however, important to see how authenticity refers to the holistic shape of objects, including their changes, transformations, and – by extension – their accrual of narratives. Authenticity can refer not only to particular objects but to the collection as a whole and how it changes.

In heritage literature, much debate revolves around the conceptual clarification of authenticity and on the balance between the subjective and objective with regards to personal experience.⁶¹ These concepts then evolve through the wider social spectrum into the idea of what we can call “constructive” authenticity, an amalgam of subjective and objective authentic experiences. MacCannell also provides the concept of staged authenticity,⁶² which has been developed further by scholars⁶³ to provide a matrix of authenticity which combines elements of reality with what is fake or fiction.

Is Okoński’s narrative authentic? Having good knowledge of the history of cabinets of curiosities, Okoński considers his cabinet as an opportunity to build a story and present it to invited guests. The rarity of objects, their uniqueness, make the entire story more appealing, while the collection itself aspires to a higher status (e.g., as a museum).

It is hard to resist the impression that the desire to raise amazement among the public translated into colouring and adding facts, if not outright mystification. Heritage is, after all, about telling stories. And it is stories’ prerogative to incorporate both true and fictional elements. Here the storyteller is an artist who possesses the authority to be listened to. Lowenthal distinguishes heritage from history, and his remarks brilliantly support the view that Okoński’s narrative is authentic: “Heritage should not be confused with history. History seeks to convince by truth, and succumbs to falsehood. Heritage exaggerates and omits, candidly invents and frankly forgets, and thrives on ignorance and error.”⁶⁴

Lowenthal also refers to the element of fiction, which in his view is a justified part of heritage. In this way, all uncertain and unverified stories which Okoński may tell about his objects become part of heritage. According to Lowenthal, “Fiction resists fact to persist as heritage.”⁶⁵

...heritage everywhere not only tolerates but thrives on historical error. Falsified legacies are integral to group identity and uniqueness. Those who seek a past as sound as a bell forget that bells *need* built-in imperfections to bring out their individual resonances.⁶⁶

⁶⁰ LABADI, Sophia. World Heritage, authenticity and post-authenticity: International and national perspectives. In: *Heritage and Globalisation*. Sophia Labadi and Colin Long (eds.) Abingdon: Routledge, 2010, p. 84.

⁶¹ WANG, Ning. Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. In: *Annals of Tourism Research* 26(2), 1999.

⁶² MACCANNELL, Dean. Staged authenticity: arrangements of social space in tourist settings. In: *American Sociological Review* 79, 1973 [1999], pp. 589–603.

⁶³ Inter alia MOSCARDO, Gianna and PEARCE, Philip. Historic theme parks: an Australian experience in authenticity. In: *Annals of Tourism Research* 13(3), 1986, pp. 467–469.

⁶⁴ LOWENTHAL, David. Fabricating Heritage. In: *History and Memory* 10(1), 1998, p. 7.

⁶⁵ Ibidem, p. 10.

⁶⁶ Ibidem, p. 11.

Fiction is not the opposite of fact but its complement, giving our lives a more lasting shape. To “locate our own private stories within a larger collective narrative,” notes a historian, we embrace “true” lies, credible falsehoods.⁶⁷

During his tour, Okoński recounts numerous stories about selected objects. They entertain and amaze us. Some are questionable and make one wonder whether the collector–artist is confabulating. Here, however, we should turn to museums, which, as institutions of unique authority, look after and research collections. Okoński, as an expert on antiquities, points out the often uncertain provenance of objects and a lack of sources which could unambiguously indicate their attribution and dating.

Art history itself presupposes that we must have sources, we must have accounts, commissions. Note that for most medieval art, for example, we don’t have that. We have some residual information. ... science is advancing, it’s giving us new tools, but still, let’s not kid ourselves, we don’t know the real authors of some sixty percent of the paintings of the old masters, because they’re not signed. Also, we are still in fact adding a master, a name, a meaning to them. The beginning of the nineteenth century, when art history was born, was marked by complete chaos. It became fashionable, so these objects started to be forged even then, and it turns out that a lot of objects that we think are original are also forgeries.... I think it is a pipe dream to treat art history as strictly a science whose judgement is unequivocal and definitive.⁶⁸

So, just like a researcher in a museum, Okoński is equipped with his art history and antiquarian knowledge and he searches for information, makes interpretations and comes up with his own conclusions grounded on comparisons and references. In a way, we may say that he creates facts, not with the aim to deceive but to help understand the continuity of art production and material history. As Lowenthal argues:

As a living force the past is ever made. Heritage cannot be stored in a vault or an attic; the true steward adds his own stamp to his predecessors’. It is our felt duty to augment what we bequeath; the legacy must gain new resonance while in our care. ... To reshape is as vital as to preserve.⁶⁹

Okoński views collecting as storytelling which is grounded on knowledge, and sometimes also fragmented information.

I think art history and collecting is storytelling with the ability to argue. We sit down with art historians and come up with theories about a particular painting and history, with each of us having a completely different perspective. Together we are just beginning to build some coherent and holistic story about a given subject.... You know, we’re able to build a whole story ... through mysticism, through faith ... history gives value simply to these objects, and the possessor of certain elements becomes “ruler of the rings.”⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Ibidem, p. 18.

⁶⁸ OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 29 October 2024.

⁶⁹ LOWENTHAL, *Fabricating Heritage...*, p. 19.

⁷⁰ OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 29 October 2024.

Wrapping up the discussion, let us come back to the titular question: Can heritage be made as artistic practice? Having analysed Okoński's cabinet of curiosities in the light of the tradition of cabinets and the terms of authenticity, storytelling and heritage performance, we may risk stating that what Okoński is doing is indeed the creation of heritage. He selects objects from the past (for varying reasons: aesthetic, symbolic, cultural, or documentation purposes), they become part of his life, and what seems to be a demand of the present, according to the previously quoted Ashworth at al.,⁷¹ he builds and develops stories around them, finally sharing the objects in a new setting in the cabinet and their accompanying stories with his guests. Items in the cabinet may represent various degrees of truth and fiction, yet they are not a determinant of heritage. Additionally, the process of making the cabinet of curiosities becomes heritage in Okoński's case. He is continuing the tradition of building cabinets of curiosities, so here it is not just the final effect but also the skills that stand behind it that constitute heritage. Referring to UNESCO's nomenclature, this would be intangible heritage; however, various authors⁷² raise the irrelevance of division into tangible and intangible heritage.

The fact that Okoński is an artist transforms the character of his cabinet. His vast knowledge of tradition makes it obvious that there is no coincidence; everything is planned, directed and intentionally staged. The aesthetics of particular still lifes, as well as the entire design of the cabinet of curiosities in a Baroque costume, bring us to the idea that heritage – our heritage that we select today – is arranged, formed and given an aesthetic form, which then takes on a life of its own and continually changes. It serves us for our purposes. Okoński's purpose, or at least one of them, is to demonstrate the continuity of art and cultural practices, paying respect to tradition by giving it a contemporary form. Okoński's cabinet constitutes a metaphorical call to search the past for curious objects and stories, and to build new connections between them today.

Furthermore, in acting as a medium of continuity in the creation of his cabinet of curiosities, Okoński is not only creating a private heritage which is pertinent to his personal life. Thanks to the meetings he holds in his salon, Okoński opens up his collection to the public – albeit in a limited capacity – and allows visitors to experience this heritage themselves, much like an artist invites an audience to experience his works. Yet this may be taken one step further and the question may be posed: are the visitors themselves also unwittingly participating in the creation of heritage? Just as Okoński's activities are born out of collecting and lean on the tradition of the early *Wunderkammern*, so too do his guests play their role: they experience, they marvel, they actively take part in this heritage. However, visitors to the salon are not merely feeding into the continuous evolution of the cabinet of curiosities, they are themselves part and parcel of the city's complex heritage with its ever-evolving social and artistic life.

The case of Okoński's approach to heritage and interpretation of his practice as heritagisation constitutes a borderland of who makes heritage and how. Our aim is to consider the process of heritage-making as diverse, complex and inclusive, not only favouring the obvious, but also considering peripheries, in terms of geography and scale, as well as crossdisciplinarity.

Mateusz Okoński's cabinet of curiosities is an artistic product deeply rooted in the European tradition which not only constitutes heritage now but – for as long as the artist is alive – also has potential to evolve through the heritagisation process. This especially rings true as his collection

⁷¹ ASHWORTH, GRAHAM, and TUNBRIDGE, *Pluralising pasts...*

⁷² For instance SMITH, *Uses of heritage...*

is already considered as part of the heritage of the city of Kraków, and in this way is not only in the private domain but in the public and more universal realms.

After reading about and listening to Mateusz Okoński's cabinet of curiosities, the following photographs (1-6) offer a glimpse of two of the rooms; the last one (6) shows the artist himself. Photo by Katarzyna Jagodzińska.









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Interviews

OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 10 June 2024.

OKOŃSKI, Mateusz. Interview with the artist on 29 October 2024.