

Sven Spieker, *The Big Archive. Art from Bureaucracy*

Spieker's book investigates the archive—understood both as a bureaucratic institution and as an index of evolving attitudes towards contingency in art and science—as a crucible of 20th-century art, from Marcel Duchamp to postwar photography and installation. In recent years, the archive has become the trope of choice for a dazzling variety of artistic activities. Giving the discussion some much-needed historical traction, Spieker argues that not every accumulation of objects in 20th-century art deserves to be called an archive and that conversely archival elements may affect artistic practices that seem, on the surface, to have little to do with archives. Beginning with the 19th-century and its obsession with the registration of contingent time, this book explores the relevance of the archive for our understanding of a specifically modern visuality. Its main argument is that the archive in the work of contemporary artists such as Gerhard Richter, Walid Raad, Boris Mikhailov, Susan Hiller, and Sophie Calle may be viewed as a response to the archival—if by no means unified or homogeneous—activities of the historical avant-garde-movements. Where 19th-century archivists framed contingency by appeals to readability and hermeneutics, early 20th-century artists—Dadaists, Constructivists, Surrealists—favored discontinuous, non-

linear archives that resist hermeneutic reading and ordered representation. The avant-garde effected its critique of the 19th-century archive by pointing out that contingency and chance may affect its operations at every level (Duchamp); by compiling collections of moments in time that elude the traditional archive (early Surrealism); and by challenging, at least tentatively, the Newtonian underpinnings of the archive's topography and its optical correlatives (El Lissitzky, Eisenstein). Spieker contends that modernism, grounded though it may be in claims to immediacy and innovation that eschew administrative support, is born from the spirit of the bureaucracy, its archives, media, filing techniques, and claims to power.