REVIEW OF: THE BIG ARCHIVE: ART FROM BUREAUCRACY

By Spieker, Sven (2008). MIT Press, 219pp. $24.95 USD, ISBN-13: 978-0-262-19570-6

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Art theorists' engage with the issue of archives from an entirely opposite angle than librarians and archivists. In *The Big Archive*, Spieker compares artists throughout the twentieth century to archivists and those who have created archives. Heavily discussing aspects of time, and chronologically capturing the blossoming of archives from eighteenth-century legal depositories, to nineteenth-century record-houses, to present-day historical resources, the book's main focus is the role the bureaucratic archive has played in the creation of twentieth-century art and installation.

"[T]he earliest known archives contained objects neatly strung up on suspended threads, 'one thing after another'. These archive strings functioned as navigational tools—a kind of cybernetic feedback—that allowed their users to keep their bearings in time and space." (56) Not only is this an intriguing form of a finding aid, this theme of staying connected with the origins of archives recurs throughout the book.

Memory, loss, and possession play a part in artists' interpretation of archives. While archives have existed ever since people began documentation of any sort, mainly administrative forms are important to the author: the flurry of paper created by typewriters, files and card indexes. James Beniger referred to these technologies "as a 'control revolution' in the period 1880-1930, a reaction to the 'loss of economic and political control … during the Industrial Revolution'." (5) The author sees twentieth-century modernism as a reaction to the storage crisis brought on after Beniger's revolution; a paper jam due to an uptick of data.

What happens when an archive collects everything? Is the archive haunted by its contents, or just overflowing with (largely) useless ephemera? What is the purpose of modern archives—to reconnect us with that which we've lost? These questions are answered loquaciously in the text. "Archives do not record experience so much as its absence; they mark the point where an experience is missing from its proper place, and what is returned to us in an archive may well be something we never possessed in the first place." (3)

Spieker starts by introducing the nineteenth-century archive, a theme that he ties throughout the book, regardless of era or topic, and delves briefly into its technical aspects. He explains that the role of archives in the 1800s was as depositories records, and served as a register for time itself. The nineteenth-century archive impacted twentieth-century art through the study and challenge of the roles that time and irrationality play in an archive.

He awkwardly attempts to work Freud into the book, a chapter that seems a far stretch to relate to the book's topic. Next, Dadaist montage and Duchamp's readymades are discussed, particularly their attitudes toward chance and their thorough self-documentation. This work's challenge to the nineteenth-century archive is discussed as the anti-archive in response to the paper jam after WWI, and the refusal to acknowledge the nineteenth-century archive as anything else than garbage.

This segways into the Surrealist's critique of the archive and their issues with time. Surrealists were obsessed with the documentation of their movement. They tried to understand the data of the unconscious, and kept meticulous notes on their ideas, actions and dreams in their Bureau de Recherches, an archive based on memory. "[T]he Surrealist archive did not seek to introduce order…into what is conscious and known, but to detect organization in what is unknown." (103) The medium of film is touched on, and its relationship to the museum-as-archive.

Interestingly, he draws a parallel between the production of paperwork in the nineteenth-century as the task of women, but that its "arrangement, preservation, and protection in the registry were the undisputed prerogative of men." (23) An entire chapter could have been written on the gender

asymmetry present in archives: the need to separate women from men, the fear that women might blab the archives' secrets, and the view that archives were men's domains, due to the strict imposition of order.

The most interesting of the chapters is Chapter 7, "Archive, Database, Photography", tying "the interest shown by late-twentieth-century artists in the (photo) archive…to the waning of the aesthetic of shock (photomontage) during the 1920s." (Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 131) Focusing on postwar art, he meditates on the archive/database so consistently found in the photography of this time period. As with archives, photography allows us to perceive the past in the context of the present by "transform[ing] temporal relationships into spatial ones." (27) Albrecht Meydenbauer's *Archive of Historical Monuments* (1881) consisted of over 10,000 photographs of 837 buildings, as a testament to photography's ability to defend monuments from time and loss. During the nineteenth century, the creations of photography-based archives of monuments were a popular form of memory preservation. Later on, from 1925-1927, August Sander' archived people's professions in *People of the 20th Century,* another photographic survey that acted as an archive from its inception. In the late twentieth century, artists complied and utilized photo archives in new forms, but still ones that referenced earlier archival practices. Walid Raad's *Atlas Group Archive* (1989-2004) was designed to research and document the contemporary history of Lebanon, especially the wars of 1975 to 1990. (152) Each file in his archive consisted of audio that had been both found and produced as an answer to the experience of war. This use of archive-as-medium became prevalent during the late twentieth century.

In each chapter, Spieker chooses a handful of artists' works to illustrate his points, from contemporary artist Sophie Calle, to Soviet photographer Boris Mikhailov, to architect Le Corbusier. In late twentieth-century art and art criticism, the archive became a wildly popular choice of medium, as reflected by the wide scope of artists represented in the book. Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" is referenced in regards to photography as its ability to fragment the object being captured in still format, much like an archive preserves only fragments of history and time. Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov is highly aware of photo archives, as their absence loudly reminded the Soviet people of their oppression, since journalists weren't allowed to photograph the war and famine of the 1930s. The entire visual history of that time period has been sanitized; edited and used "as a tool for widespread repression and collective amnesia." (160) Mikhailov's own work emphasizes repetition and pairs, and is an answer to the idea of the archive as its own entity—his work suggests that an archive is only as useful as how the user interacts with it.

Appropriately, and almost too late, Spieker mentions the role of the museum in art based on archives. He talks about the relationship between the two, how one fuels the other, and how the museum's storehouse is shorthand for an archive. As early as the 1920s, Soviet Futurists were calling for a destruction of art museums, to be replaced with a "new museum"—thus the blending of the museum and its archives. They used the word "archive" as a derogatory term for a "revisionist attitude toward the past." (105) Aleksandr Rodchenko, as head of the Soviet Museum Bureau, used the term "archive" to mean the traditional art museum, as, in his eyes, the archive was only meant for the "static preservation of art, serving ethnographers, specialists, and amateurs." (106)

The book concludes by looking at artists who aren't afraid of disorder and destruction in an archive. Since archives are equated with a collective memory, Spieker introduces contemporary artists that play with this concept, and what it means now that everyone can both have access to archives through the computer, and can produce their own archives. His example of Andrea Fraser's performance piece *Information Room* (1998) in which she invited visitors to a museum's archives to dig through its documents until they were completely out of place, comments on the removal or destruction of records, and what information is or is not sacred in an archive. This work can also now be seen in the light of digital archives: what does an archive look like, and how useful does it become when only fragments are available to the public, and seem disjointed as experienced through the syntax of the internet?

The book swings between spot-on observances and insights, to wordy and heady exaggerations of an idea. While his discussion of photography as a medium familiar to archives is thrilling, his arguments about the psychology of archives seem out of place in this book on art. The chronological organization of the book is a good solution to the near-impossible task of corralling all the information on archive-driven artwork into some semblance of a whole. Spieker can spout at length both about twentieth century artists, and archives equally. Overall, this book is a great addition to any library where those curious about archival history or contemporary art roam.