Featuring one of the most bureaucratic institutions of our time, The Big Archive: Art From Bureaucracy provides a comprehensive analysis of the nineteenth-century archive and its influence on modernity and modernist artistic practice. Its author, Sven Spieker, is professor of Russian and comparative literature and affiliate professor of art and history of art and architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara; he has made modernism and variant aspects of the avant-garde and postwar art the focus of his scholarship. He has published extensively on themes of memory, forgetting, and the nineteenth-century archive in modernist artwork.

In this study, Spieker draws on both Freudian psychoanalysis and the introduction of archival principles in late nineteenth-century Europe to outline a chronological arrangement of cultural response and critique of the archive, including the technologies (“the typewriter, the card index, and files”) that play a significant role in the production of the cultural archive. He also strings together a series of cultural movements, beginning with Duchamp and Dadaism and followed by Surrealism’s lacuna of time and memory and El Lissitzky’s Demonstration Rooms, which lead to an interest in film as an archival medium. Continuing with an examination of the photography archives in the postwar period, he analyzes the connection between photography and a contemporary technology of the archive, the database. The book concludes with an investigation of the fallible archive, looking at contemporary artists and curators who have used the tools of bureaucracy and the archive to question the foundation of archival production.

This volume complements existing works that have examined the intersection between archives and culture, specifically the International Center of Photography’s 2008 exhibition catalog Archive Fever: Uses of the Document in Contemporary Art by Okwui Enwezor and Jacques Derrida’s Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996).

The cover image—Alexandr Rodchenko’s “Down with Bureaucratism”— is one of the book’s many black-and-white images that illustrate the pervasive force of the archive in twentieth-century culture. The endnotes document critical articles, books, and other works that Spieker has referenced. This book is recommended to scholars, faculty, and upper-and graduate-level students of modern art history, who will find it to be a thoughtful, alternative examination of archives, as both the depository of the evidence of art production and the organizing principle for artistic practices.

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