RISS Review: Library Stack

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Library Stack is a freely-available web resource that gathers digitally-born publications and art products into a modern, open-access database. Billing itself as an "art and culture digital lending library," Library Stack aggregates a wide range of digital resources on a visually appealing platform that provides effectively collected and indexed ebooks, audio files, videos, applications, and digital documents being published across the fields of contemporary art and design, architecture and urbanism, cultural criticism, and related disciplines.

Library Stack is owned and operated by Erik Wysocan and Benjamin Tiven, both artists, which is apparent in the design of the online portal that is clearly driven by contemporary graphic design aesthetic. Using a balance of image, color, and text, the site is inviting and intuitive to navigate. The leftmost column of all pages is anchored by a set of helpful filtering menus, including Format, Subjects (divided into subcategories), Indexes, and Top Keywords. Top-level pages include "Open Stacks," which is identical to the main landing page, and "Programs," which at present seems to include collections of materials by theme or author, though no explanation of content groupings is provided on either page. While an Advanced Search feature is provided, it lacks transparency in use and application, making the granular searching more difficult for seasoned researchers. Additionally, the Advanced Search feature reveals metadata inconsistencies within the site; for example, a search for "audio" in the format field yields very different results from the ready-made "Audio" format category.

The presentation, including image selection and the tone of the text written by the Library Stack editors, is accessible and descriptive. Library Stack provides account functionality, allowing users to register an account and save entries in their "bookshelf" for later reading.

Institutional subscriptions are also available, which Library Stack states "include full-text search, database record ingestion, commercial ebook distribution, and specialty digital arts content." In a live presentation by Tiven in 2017 attended by this reviewer, Tiven communicated further details on institutional subscriptions, which were noted to include archive-ready digital objects, digital ephemera, online projects, and teaching syllabi using Library Stack materials.

The objects collected in Library Stack are aimed at an audience that includes students, working artists, academics, and also those simply interested in digital publications, arts, and cultural examination. Using the website as a platform, Library Stack mirrors the flexibility, range, and democratic nature that is visible within its content. The delivery method on the site of these freely-distributed digital objects is seamless. Born-digital art publications are fairly contemporary, and as such there are only a few resources that compare to Library Stack's art coverage. Rhizome's artbase is the closest in comparison, but lacks the variety of media, range of subject areas, ease of access, and overall functionality that Library Stack provides. The Library Stack database has a unique mix of access points for the public, with some entries simply pointing to other websites with the original free content, while others are directly downloadable. Library Stack creates records with libraries in mind by sending metadata to OCLC using DCMI vocabulary, via their Digital Gateway.

Overall, Library Stack is a resource that focuses on a quickly expanding field of independently produced digital cultural content, including podcasts, art, and essays. For users who are interested in digital art objects, Library Stack provides a dynamically curated group of resources, including items such as Brian Eno's Bloom App for the iPhone, Al Gore Woke Up One Morning Wondering Screensaver, or Project Seen downloadable font. For those interested in culturally critical ebooks and journals, Library Stack indexes articles from and provides inroads to sites like Fall Semester and Fictional Journal, among others. While the collection that is currently gathered is wide ranging, the standards and policies around what is considered for inclusion is unclear. However, the detailed metadata and thorough indexing of this diverse collection of materials makes Library Stack a valuable and interesting resource for students, artists, and academics alike.