av10-1

by

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Submitted to the Graphic Design Board of Study

School of Art+Design

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Fine Arts

Purchase College
State University of New York

May, 2019

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The Project

av|10-1 is a creative agency and independent cassette label that makes audio and visual experiences for its clients.

Cassettes have become a kind of kitch at this point, a remnant medium from a bygone era, but there is a growing resurgence of cassette culture in today's underground independent music scene. Cassettes are inexpensive to produce and when combined with a digital download card, they become an analog and digital release.

This way, a fan can walk out of a concert with a physical artifact of that experience and have access to the music even if they don’t have a tape player.

I started this project with the intention of using it as a platform to release my own music, but decided to expand the scope of the project to building out a brand, acquiring the means for production, approaching artists who might be interested in putting out a tape, developing compensation arrangements and, of course, designing album/cassette art.

Building the brand

I decided to go with the name av|10-1 for a few reasons: “av” stands for audio and video production, “10-1” kind of looks like “101” which calls academic project to mind, and finally the entire name also happens to be my campus address: alumni village, building 10, apartment 1. I replaced the “0” in “10” with an icon that represents the world, because I’d like this to grow the brand into an international community, someday.

I wanted the logo to look like it was a call back to analog recording packaging and ephemera: rectangular compositions, grotesque sans serif abbreviations, minimalist iconography and geometric accoutrements.

I planted digital seeds on the internet in the form of an Instagram account (@av10_1) where I posted updates and logo experiments, a Soundcloud account / playlist, a Bandcamp label page and YouTube page. I purchased the domain www.avten1.com but have yet to develop a working site.

I knew that I wanted the project to include a video component, not only as a way of branding the label, but also for each release. Since the music was going to exist both physically and digitally, I decided I would use analog special effects techniques to produce the content, then bring it in the digital world and utilize post production techniques.

One of the analog techniques I explored was the cloud tank—a fish tank filled with water that you shoot liquids of different densities and colors into and observe how them interacting with static elements. You can see it in action in films like Close Encounters of the Third Kind (1977), Independence Day (1996) and Ghostbusters (1984).

I 3D printed the logo, attached it to a sheet of transparency with lead sinkers attached, sank some sheets of cellophane in the background to add some texture and used some freestyle camera / lighting work to capture elements interacting with the logo.
Through experimentation with materials and research into artists like Paul Zaloom and Basil Twist, the cloud tank became a stage for twisted cellophane, silk, plastic grass, paper, and other random bits to come to life. These experiments eventually became great assets that I used in several promotional videos.

Neurojelly - by PJ (New Paltz, NY)

My roommate PJ had a few albums under his belt already. When I approached him about doing a tape, he was very receptive. He had a digitally released album called Neurojelly that came out a year or so before and was interested in doing a physical release. We agreed that I would produce the tapes and layout the j card and tape labels. While I was brainstorming concepts, he told me that he already had some artwork prepared and that he would like me to use that as the inspiration for the packaging. I was reluctant at first, because I had my own vision for the release, but he insisted. We ended up compromising and I made 20 “Trade” tapes and 20 “Deluxe Tapes”.

The trade tapes (x.) consisted of a J-4 style j card—a 4 panel J-card, front and back, which I populated with the artwork they provided. I was granted the liberty of laying out the track listing and the title. For the promotional video (x.), I decided to play off the theme of the title and the vibe of the music. I was going for something dark, eerie, uncanny and primordial. I wanted the name to be alive, but in an unconscious, dormant way — like the way brain cells look under a microscope — a part of a greater, organic whole.

I experimented with photographing multiple types of letters and gelatinous substances, and then ended up purchasing a ring toss water toy game I remembered from the dentist’s office; filled it with clear soap to act as a substrate, suspended block letters inside and drilled canals for food coloring placed at the bottom of the container via air pumps. After lining a close up shot, I began pushing the buttons and sending the red liquid up through the channels in a heartbeat rhythm. After 13 takes (washing the container out and re-positioning each letter with tweezers), I had 5 minutes of good footage to use. I rendered the footage through an app that added a glitch VHS style layer and synced up the song 08 - godmonster before posting it to the av|10-1 instagram.

For the “Deluxe Tapes” I wanted to have a special handmade insert as part of the package. I glued two pieces of acetate together and injected different materials inside such as aspirin, acrylic paint, ink sawdust and vegetable oil before sealing it up into a credit card-sized insert.

These never seemed to seal properly and they would leak all the time so I had to keep trying different methods. I ended up purchasing a heat sealer and using a thinner plastic. This gave me the ability to make a perfect, water tight seal for my endlessly mutating inserts. In lieu of a collectible, I measured out the size of the J card and made a thin oil/ink/air filled insert that fit in front of the J card inside the case.

The ink /oil density mixture was viscous enough that it could change its position by gravity alone, producing a lava lamp type effect when the cassette is placed vertically and flipped. The artwork and inner layout were redesigned as well. I took some of the prototype inserts, scanned them in at high resolution and inserted them into the J card template. I changed the typeface from Universe to Hamilton Gothic Extended, dropped the title except for the capital n.
The letterform was pretty symmetrical, so when the case was flipped to interact with the jelly insert it was still legible.

I took the same scans from the prototypes and used them for the tape labels as well. I ordered custom clear cassette tapes with red tape from duplicate.ca, a Canadian company that specializes in physical cassette tape production. I duplicated them myself using (2) 3x tape duplicators purchased off eBay.

**Camp by Borger (Rochester, NY)**

I played a show (concert) with Borger over winter break and really enjoyed their sound. They didn’t have a drummer at that point, just a dreamy, spaced out shoegaze style that I thought would sound great on tape.

They stayed at my apartment on campus for a weekend while recording their album. I contacted a teammate of mine from the golf team who is majoring in music studio production named Will Burger. He agreed to produce the album, Borger found a drummer and we booked the dates.

While they stayed with me, we talked about album art ideas. At first, they were open to some concepts I had about a typographic exploration using meat as letters, but they decided to go with one of their friend’s collages and font choices and use the meat letter idea for when they record a full length album this summer.

During the recording sessions and downtime I was able to take a lot of b roll footage for the video while they were hanging out and recording.

Using their predetermined assets, I made a double sided J-4 layout that featured type on a path and a banner. I ordered “computer yellow” cassettes with red tape, but the singer changed the track order shortly after the purchase, which made you have to flip the tape mid song.

I ended up using extra tapes I had from messed up Neurojelly cassettes that were the wrong color but had more recording time. I improvised and made a new tape label with a purple cast that featured photos of the band members.

They ordered 30 tapes, 20 CD’s and asked me to design their bandcamp page. I expect to do more work with them in the future.

**Hit the Floor by Willem (Albany, NY)**

Willem is the stage name of my golf teammate, co-producer and friend, Will Burger. Will saw some of the cloud tank experiments I was doing for the av|10-1 branding and commissioned an album cover for a single he was going to release called “Hit the Floor”.

After the album cover was finished, I pitched the idea of doing a limited run of 10 tapes for the release, and he let me run with the design.

I was able to use the computer yellow tapes I had leftover from the Borger fiasco, so
Hit the Floor had premium packaging and is one of my favorite designs to date.

**Retro Reverse by Amory Cutting (Portland, OR)**

I had been doing some design consulting with Amory for a book he’s writing called The Mare and when I brought up my senior project, he said he’d like to release one of his side projects through the label.

The instrumental album is written on guitars and synthesizers, which blend the analog / digital concept of av|10-1.

Amory provided a small collage that he was using for the digital album artwork. I pulled the pale yellow from the background and used it as a base.

I set the title in Gill Sans, below the artwork; reflected the final “E” in REVERSE and repeated the artist’s name faded vertically three times, each time with more opacity, above the collage. I repeated the fading repetitive theme in a horizontal direction on the interior of the J card with blue triangles and again (vertically) on the back with the av|10-1 logo.

**The Video**

This was so much fun to make.

I structured the video into 3 chapters that correspond to the logo: branding, audio / visual and production

Then bumper system for the audio segment was inspired by classic MTV bumpers from the 80’s. They featured a suspending a spinning tape of the artist that was about to be portrayed.

In the closing bumper, the water refracts the light at a certain point and the ripples on top become visible, resembling waveforms of the music. I added a color key filter and distorted some of the levels to bump the texture up and give it some grit.

The opening segment is a collection of cloud tank experiments and 3D printed logo interactions using lighting and camera movement to provide a dynamic image. It breaks into chapter 2 with edited footage from when Borger came to record.

Next up is Neurojelly, followed by Amory Cutting and finally Willem. Each segment has a soundtrack that corresponds to the artist being featured.

The last scene is a compilation of the analog production that went into all of the tapes, with an overlay of some cloud tank footage.
The Presentation

I wanted to find a clean, professional way to display the tapes and video so that they could speak for themselves. I requested a podium and monitor from the school and purchased two, 18"x24" aluminum grid racks from amazon.

The monitor was mounted at eye level and the podium was placed underneath. In an attempt to bring emphasis to the analog, physical nature of the brand value, I took the 3D printed logo and mounted it onto black foam core with plastic cement. I then repurposed a shelf from the metal grids to become an angled display for the new lockup and secured it with packing tape.

After the logo was set, I began the construction of the grid display by cutting a 5x4 grid of 4 1/4"x 2 1/4" holes into an 18"x24" sheet of white foam core. After checking the sizing of each cavity with a cassette case, I mounted this to a sheet of black foam core of the same size and then repeated the process again for a total of (2) grid displays.

I attached the foam core grids to the racks with hook fasteners, measured 6” from the monitor and hung each display flush. I put 5 tapes in each row and secured them with tape, so that each column displayed all four artists.

I placed a cassette player on the left edge of the podium and loaded it with a Borger tape. In the center, I placed the 3d printed logo, flanked by two QR Codes — one for the Instagram account and one for the Soundcloud playlist. Between these QR Codes was a pile of 6"x1" box logo stickers. On the right of the podium I placed one of each tape in a clear case so that the tape labels could be observed. I added one of the Neurojelly Deluxe tapes for interactive purposes.

What's Next?

I started this project because I wanted create an catalyst for my designs and help with people.

So far it’s been successful:

I feel like my design abilities leveled up, I learned how to make awesome videos, improved my studio practices, met a bunch of cool new people, got to work with my friends and heard a lot of new music.

Next, I need to get a website together, and look into expanding what types of production services I could offer. I’d like to release vinyl at some point and look into live performance projections.

An av|10-1 book of album art is definatley on the radar.

I’d like to turn this into an LLC so I can use it as a platform for freelance design.

I would say that I acheived most of my goals this semester and I can’t wait to see what this project is going to evolve into in the next 5 years.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K8q_DZHakQ <-- Senior Project Video