

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES COLLABORATIVE RESEARCH GRANT

*Letterpress Learning: A Campus & Community Partnership for Tactile
Experience Learning*

Professor Deborah Hollis, University Libraries

Associate Professor Joel Swanson, ATLAS Institute

RESEARCH QUESTION:

“What might we learn by comparing historical, analog text-based technologies with contemporary text-based technologies?”

CU PARTNERS

Rare and Distinctive Collections

CU Art Museum

The ATLAS Institute

TYPO Lab

OUTSIDE PARTNERS

Organizations

Book Arts League, Boulder

Matter Design Studio, Denver

People

Steve Matteson: Type Designer (Aptos, Droid, Open Sans, etc.)

Tia Blassingame: Artist, letterpress printer, Primrose Press, Scripps College

Rick Griffith: (AIGA The Professional Association for Design) Medal Winner

EXPERIMENTAL TYPOGRAPHY ATLAS 4130/5130

Explores typography as a form for visual communication and expression, including the role of computation within typography. Projects are designed to expand your understanding of the function of type in design, art, and the culture.

EXPERIMENTAL TYPOGRAPHY ATLAS 4130/5130

COURSE THEMES

Typographic Materiality: How do body, process, and physicality shape the production of meaning?

Weight of Words: In a digital era where language can feel disembodied, infinitely generated, and inauthentic, how do we imbue words with a sense of weight and meaning? What gives text presence, urgency, or permanence?

Error Making: How does each medium uniquely handle mistakes and errors? What can be learned from glitches, misprints, and failures—and how do they reveal the logic of a system?

Encoding Formats: From the physical constraints of metal type to digital standards like Unicode and OpenType, how do encoding systems shape what's possible (and impossible) to say?

GRADUATE STUDENT APPRENTICE

Ayesha Rawal

ATLAS Institute Creative Technology and Design Master's Student
Working between the TYPO Lab and Rare and Distinctive Collections



WHERE STUDENTS STARTED

Beginning of Semester Survey, September 2025

WHEN YOU THINK OF LETTERPRESS...

“old fashion,” “newspapers,” “ink,” “Gutenberg,” “physical”

80% Prefer hands-on & project-based learning

CU FIELD TRIPS

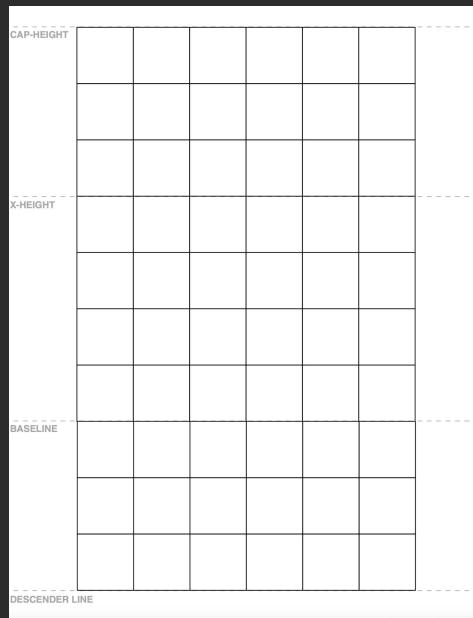
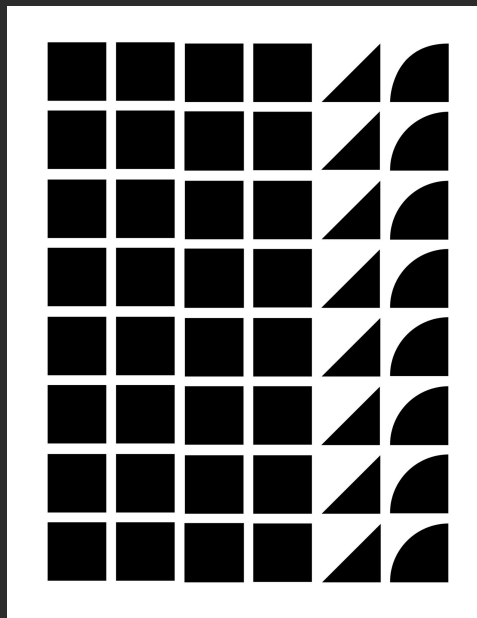
Rare & Distinctive Collections, August 28, 2026

Students visited the archives to examine letterpress ephemera up close: broadsides, specimen books, and printed materials that reveal how typography functioned before digital tools. Handling these artifacts gave them direct insight into the craft decisions, material constraints, and aesthetic sensibilities that shaped visual communication.

CU Art Museum, October 25, 2026

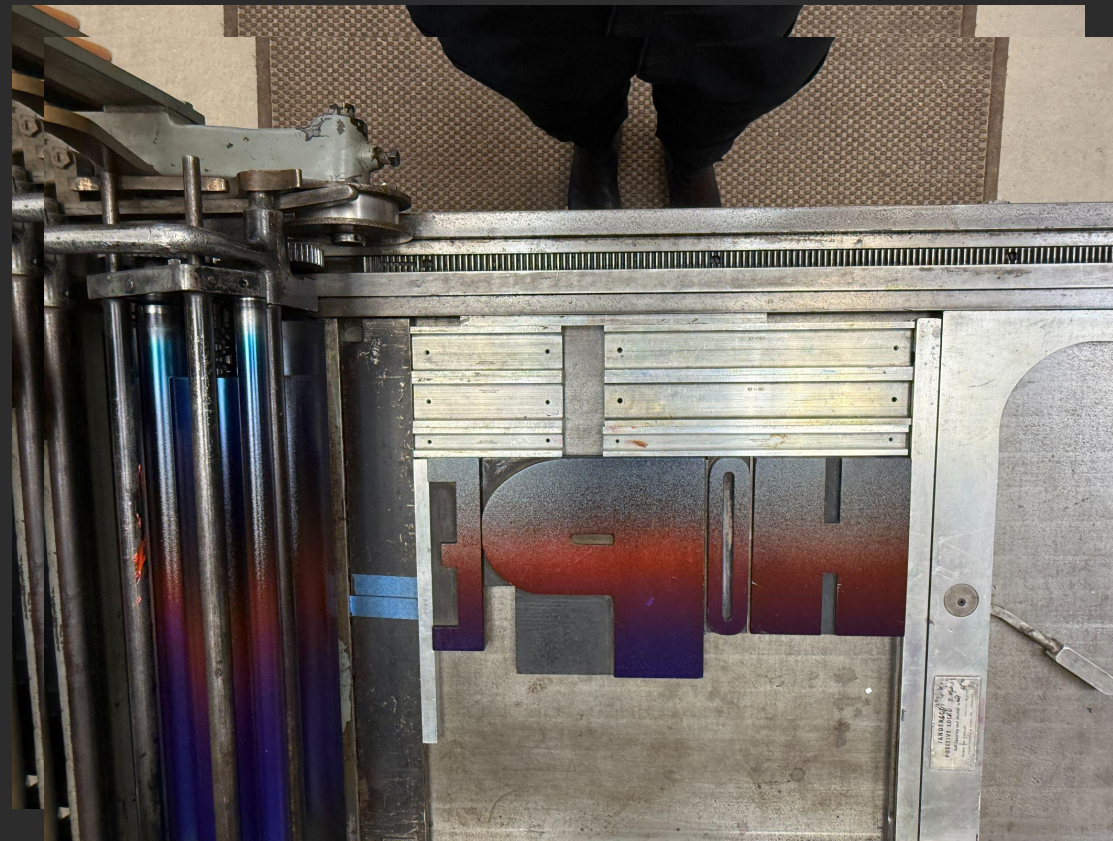
Students explored text-based work in the permanent collection, examining how contemporary artists use language as both form and content. This visit connected studio practice to broader conversations about how words operate visually, spatially, and conceptually in fine art contexts.

MODULAR: Collaborative Typeface

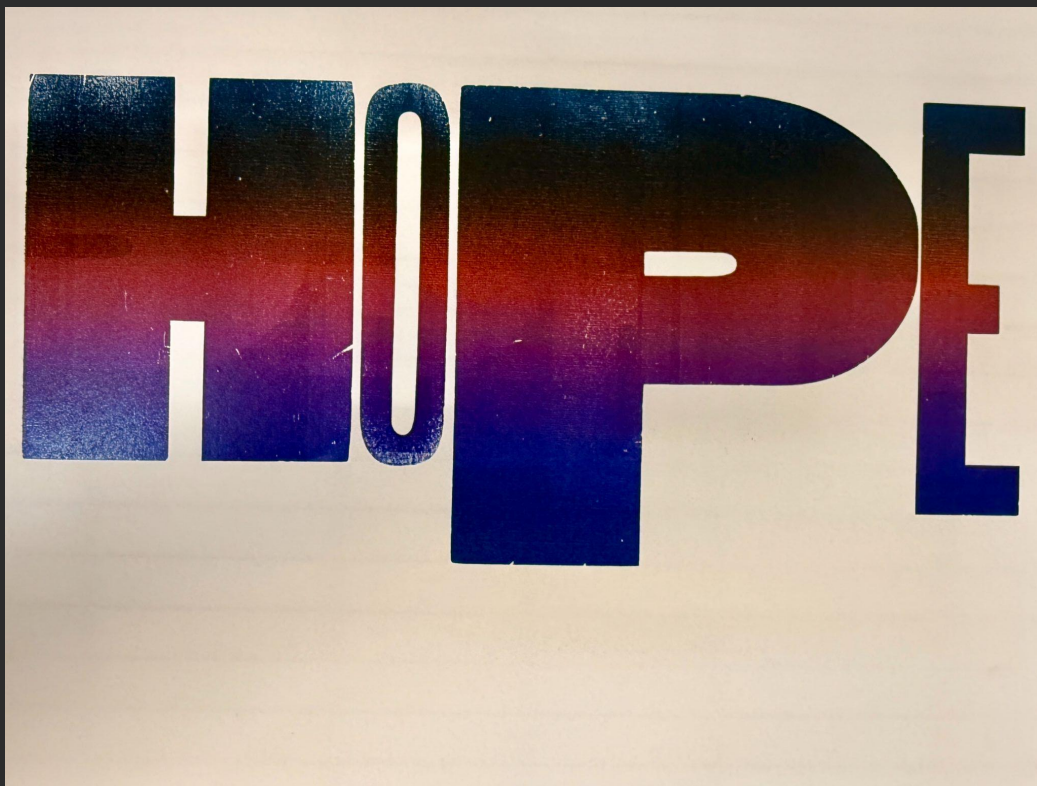


Book Arts League Workshop

October 11, 2025



Book Arts League Workshop, October 11, 2025



Matter Workshop

November 11, 2025



Matter Workshop
November 11, 2025



Matter Workshop: November 11, 2025

“The workshop was an awesome chance to see behind the scenes at an analog print studio and to experience what it's like to take part in Matter's creative process. I thought that the historical context Rick gave about all the vintage equipment brought the machinery to life in a profound way, making the workshop a hands-on lesson in printmaking history. It was also great to see so much of Rick's and the team's work up close in the space where it was created. I really appreciated the opportunity to get to know other participants while typesetting and to chat with Rick about his work.”

ETHICS & DESIGN

AKA: WAYS OF THINKING ABOUT
ETHICS WITH DESIGN AS THE
PRINCIPLE ACTION

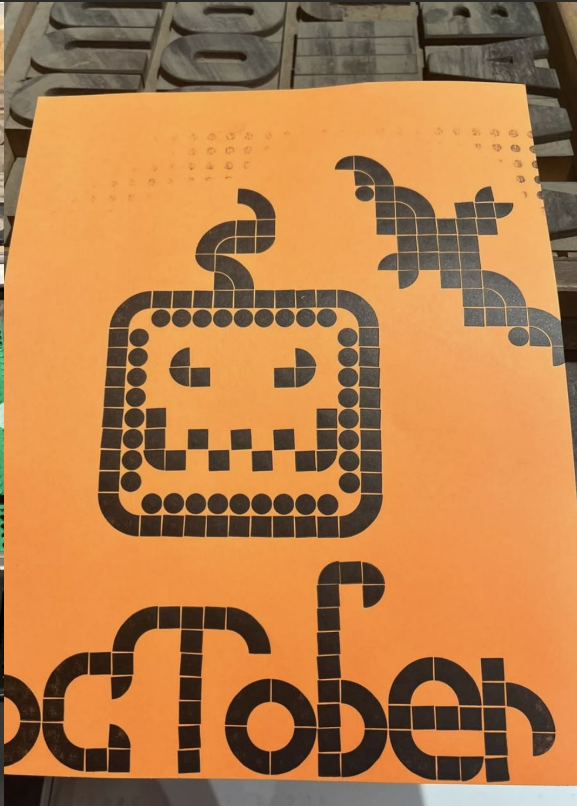
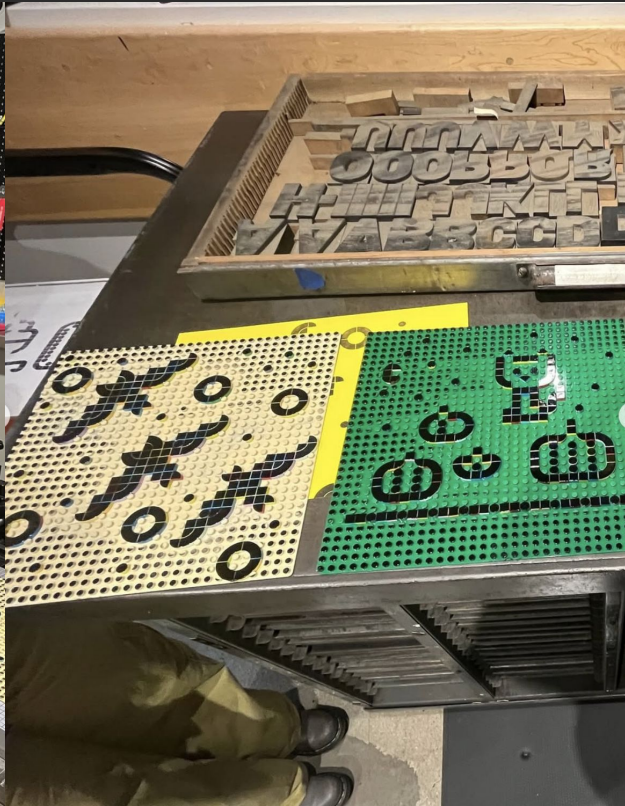


RICK November 5 / 6PM
GRIFFITH ATLAS 100

This event was generously funded by a CU Boulder Libraries Collaborative Research Grant



Lego Letterpress: Ayesha Rawal, October 31, 2025



Outcomes

- Supported experiential learning that complements studio and lecture-based instruction
- Fostered critical awareness of the relationship between tools, materials, and aesthetic decisions
- Provided direct access to rare historic print materials not typically available in standard coursework
- Introduced students to the material histories and physical processes underlying contemporary typography
- Connected digital design practice to analog precedents and craft traditions
- Expanded students' frame of reference for how text functions across fine art and commercial contexts

Experimental Typography

Final Exam Question:

Compare the material practices of at least two analog text-making technologies you explored this semester (letterpress, Risograph, hand-drawn typography, pen plotting, wood type, etc.). How do each medium's particular constraints offer different ways of giving shape and meaning to words? What does each reveal about the relationship between process, body, materiality, and meaning that digital tools obscure? How might this embodied, tactile knowledge inform your understanding of contemporary digital typography and AI-generated text?

Target Length: Around 750–1000 words. or 2–3 pages double-spaced.

“Each letter, punctuation, and space literally holds weight. It took many tries to get the spacing correct... Witnessing the extensive processes required, it was clear that in order to generate information using a letterpress, a user must fully understand how the technology functions.”

— Maya Buffett-Davis, Final Exam Essay

Experimental Typography

Final Exam Question:

“Constraints drive us to be creative and unique, making forms we might have never come up with staring at a blank computer screen.”

— Rachel Diamond, Final Exam Essay

“There is no soul in a font designed by [artificial intelligence], no hours spent planning and prototyping, no materiality to the human hands behind it. Human imperfections or intentions become a mere error that will be smoothed by the system.”

—Maggie Kempen

“I have recently been hired to paint signs for a local business. When I first started I was honestly shocked by how much I relied on the knowledge I gained in this class, particularly from hand-drawn lettering, in order to create signs that were interesting, engaging and didn't look 'off.'”

— Kai Adamchak, Final Exam Essay

THE TRANSFORMATION

SEPTEMBER / BEFORE

“old fashion”

“newspapers”

“I honestly know almost nothing [about letterpress]”

DECEMBER / AFTER

“constraints as creative force”

“embodied knowledge”

“materiality shapes meaning”

More student voices

"Design is better when it has a heart and soul, and when it's obvious that the person who created the work cares a lot about it." — Alejandra Arteaga Avelar

"Typing a query into ChatGPT does not require the user to understand the highly complex technological processes. This lack of understanding diminishes a user's agency." — Maya Buffett-Davis

"Learning these analog forms of text-making provides type designers a window into the foundation of type... a hands-on way to learn the fundamentals." — Lily Battin

"I am building a typeface based on my grandmother's handwriting. The imperfections make it hers. Working with analog processes taught me to notice and protect those tiny, human details." — Aria Brauchli

"A love letter set in Letraset would lose the emotion evoked in a mistroke of the pen, capturing the shaking hands of someone sick with emotion." — Maggie Kempen

"Analog technologies reveal the internal skeleton of type. You can see the baseline, x-height, cap height, the erase marks left on the page." — Tessa Brown

WHAT WE LEARNED

Tactile experience transforms understanding. Students who physically handled metal type developed vocabulary and frameworks that abstract instruction cannot provide.

Analog literacy enables digital critique. Understanding historical processes gave students tools to critically evaluate AI-generated text and digital typography.

Community partnerships multiply impact. The Book Arts League workshops and guest speakers provided expertise beyond what campus alone could offer.

THANK YOU

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