To Melt

A Series Of Works Related To Ice
This thesis focuses on the need for a reevaluation of the relationship between humans and nature in the face of the current ecological crisis. The author argues that the dominant anthropocentric orientation, which sees nature as a resource to be exploited for human benefit, has led to over extraction and resource abuse, disrupting the balance of ecosystems. Instead, the author suggests adopting an ethical framework based on mutual understanding and appreciation, breaking the “hunter's gaze” and fostering empathy for non-human life forms. This thesis also explores the potential for new forms of communication and engagement with nature, such as through art and media, to facilitate this shift in perspective.

The author's work as an artist centers on this reevaluation of the relationship between humans and nature, by using site-specific installations.

Keywords:
1) Non-human 
2) Ecology 
3) Contemporary art 
4) Ice 
5) Site-specific installations 
6) Non-anthropocentrism 
7) Coexistence
BACKGROUND

Coincident with the expansion of media and video art practices of the last twenty years is the harrowing exacerbation of climate degradation. The global mean surface temperature rose over the past 20 years at a rate of 0.14 ± 0.06 °C per decade. The average rate of increase is approximately three times that of the past 100 years. While scientists had anticipated extreme weather fluctuations before 2000, no measures significant enough have prevented these devastating changes from taking place ubiquitously post-2000. The fact that climate change is the aggregation of imbalances across different ecosystems and feedback loops (Rockström 461) make it hard for government or activists to pinpoint one solution. Furthermore, any concerted effort seems challenging in an increasingly divided global political landscape.

When faced with these accumulated imbalances, how might artists assume responsibility in the ecological crisis? How do we navigate this collapse? Is there a better, more dynamic approach to understanding nature through new imaginaries and, in doing so, to foster an empathetic way of being on the planet; to develop different skills as we attune to environmental cues? These questions arise from a realization that human society is, in fact, not isolated from nature. Focusing on short-sighted anthropocentric needs has led to over extraction and resource abuse, disrupting equilibriums and sending shockwaves through the survival condition of human civilization. Human activities that neglect their broader environmental implications induce self-inflicting wounds across different ecosystems and their feedback loops. Thus, it becomes vital for humans to incorporate ecological perspectives necessary for sustainable coexistence and potentially coevolution with non-humans and nature. As an artist, my work centers on a reevaluation of the dominant anthropogenic orientation (Crist 234) to nature, while offering alternative practices of engagement.

RE-EVALUATION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HUMAN AND NATURE: NEW ETHICAL FRAMEWORKS

A relationship based on understanding and appreciation for each other’s role in the broader evolution schema, instead of mere exploitation, might enable us to break the needs-oriented “human gaze” — what Australian philosopher and ecofeminist Val Plumwood refers to as the “hunter’s gaze” (263–322). In the transitional phase between an anthropocentric that we understand the formation of this way of seeing and navigating, while opening ourselves to a more empathic way of being on the planet.

Throughout history, humans have been studying non-human life forms with a commitment to adapt them to our existence. However, these endeavors constitute a paradox. According to Plumwood, “we deny the ‘soul’, the communicative and kinship potential of the other which is our soon-to-be food, in the degraded conditions inflicted by our walls of consumer distance and calculated ignorance. We are able to do this because of our conviction that we ourselves are beyond and above this process of exchange we have conceived in such degraded terms, safe inside the walls of ‘culture’ from the savage and hostile ways we think are those of ‘nature.’ Though often captured for consumption as food, our responsibility in the ecological crisis is to break through to a framework of reciprocity which brings a radical reorganization of our modes of communication. In this framework, as Plumwood invites, “the other is equally positioned as food and more than food.” A need to objectify animals requires that people first spiritualise animals, “spiritualization” means that humans actively conceive of animals as another mindful, communicative, and intentional being, and do not hide or deny the animals continuity or kinship with the human hunter. But since the purpose of spiritualization is only for hunting, it simultaneously renders the animal a piece of meat that will become food. Situations like this are what she describes as the “Hunter’s Paradox.” (281)

This entails a relationship based on an understanding and appreciation for each other’s role in the broader evolution schema, instead of mere exploitation. Only a break from this objective practice might enable us to undo the hunter’s paradox. Ecological effects present new obstacles to the aesthetic imagination, even as they inspire and require it.

As Erich Hörl mentioned in General Ecology: The New Ecological Paradigm, “We are witnessing the breakthrough of a new historical semantics: the breakthrough of ecology....There seems to be hardly any area that cannot be considered the object of ecology and thus open to an ecological reformulation.” (2)

Through my thesis work, I want to explore the possibility of incorporating non-human lifeform subjectivity into our understanding of the aquatic ecosystem. Ultimately, I want to investigate the prospect of the more-than-human world being understood by humans. For the purpose of this study, I highlight the work of American theorist Timothy Morton and four artists from different countries who, over the past twenty years, have questioned the
impact of anthropocentrism upon our relations to the environment. Each offers a more humble view on human reciprocity as it relates to landscape, art installation, and cross-species communication. Pierre Huyghe (France), Tomás Saraceno (Argentina), Ursula Biemann (Switzerland), and Joris Strijbos (Netherlands).

THE IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGIES ON ECOLOGY AND COMMUNICATION

* The “breakthrough of ecology” is fueled by the expansion of technology, which has created new ties and vast ecological impact undetectable to thnaked eye. Everyday use of plastic seems to have a minor effect on our surroundings, but roughly 300 million tons of plastic waste are produced each year. Two Google searches emit 7g of CO2, the same as boiling an electric kettle, but Google processes 8.5 billion daily searches. These seemingly negligible carbon footprints amount to a significant burden on the environment. When diluted by the user or consumer network, such environmental footprints translate to trivial individual responsibilities. This mismatch between the weight of personal action and aggregated effect is best described by yet another paradox: sorites paradox. For example, one grain of wheat does not make a heap. If one grain of wheat does not make a heap then two grains of wheat do not. If two grains of wheat do not make a heap then 3 grains do not…10,000 grains of wheat do not make a heap. A philosopher of object-oriented and ecological studies, Timothy Morton encourages us to embrace the concept of “hyperobjects” in a tech-infused world. His macro orientation suggests: “Things like: not just a Styrofoam cup or two, but all the Styrofoam on Earth.” Namely, we should consider the existence and impact of an object outside the anthropocentric space-frame and time-frame. How products and services are manufactured, used, and disposed of constantly creates new dynamics and ecosystems that can carry the impact of our daily decisions to the distant flora in the Amazon.

While recognizing the importance of considering the impact of our daily decisions on the environment and other living beings, we should also pay attention to the new possibilities that technology has opened up for communication and connection between humans and nonhumans, as well as the new ecological challenges it has brought. In the interaction between humans, animals, and technology, I consider myself a gentle translator, I am interested in creating interfaces for communication between different entities through technology, an interface that responds to the translation of information or dynamic influences between different entities, and to create a field that allows for change, convergence, and even failure.

In this tech-infused world, are we able to understand and approach a more compassionate mode of communication through digital media? By offering advanced techniques to record, analyze, and visualize sound and behavior patterns, technology has drastically shifted our approach to human-nonhuman communication in a broader sense. It enhance existing methodologies. On the other hand, it also enabled scientists and artists to make us wonder about the possibilities of a medium that would facilitate communication between humans and nonhumans (Experiments conducted by Neuralink). A platform where humans and nonhumans can explore new boundaries of consciousness and be creative in forming new connections may be closer than we think.

The hierarchy embedded in anthropocentrism blinds us from the ecological impact of our actions and values. Moreover, it prevents us from adopting insights that non-humans and nature offer. Empathy is crucial in allowing us to see non-human lifeforms on an equal footing within the broader ecosystem: seeing not necessarily “humanity” but the spirit in their existence, to create new mediums for communication. For instance, from telegraphs to modern computing devices based on 0s and 1s, new technologies gave rise to new carriers of meanings (new “morphemes”) so that thoughts and emotions can be transmitted more efficiently. Breakthroughs following Moore’s law made these mediums more democratized: digital devices and content are increasingly accessible to the public. New technologies such as neural implants that can translate an animal’s neural signal into decision-making in complex tasks may be closer than we think.
COMMUNICATION INTERFACES BETWEEN HUMANS AND NONHUMANS: A LITERATURE REVIEW

Contemporary art is host to a productive entanglement between the human and nonhuman, a presentation of co-activity where the binary opposition between subject and object dissolves. In the context of the current ecological crisis, the rights of nonhumans and the non-living are investigated through a lens focused on moving past the hierarchical ethos of the tree of life metaphor to one that recognizes the entangled relationships between phenomena. One example would be the ambition of French artist Pierre Huyghe: “Not to exhibit something to someone, but to exhibit someone to something.” His work After ALife Ahead (2017) contains a venomous sea snail, a conus textile, which sports a shell with an intricate pattern that is an example of cellular automata. An incubator holds cancer cells whose growth rate is determined by various measurements that sensors are taking of the space, which is also home to chimera peacocks and bees. He evinces a decentralized Anthropocene by realizing a world of human absence.

While Huyghe did not explicitly state his intention, his work begs the question: what is the negation of Anthropocentrism – a decentralized system or a different kind of centrism/domination? The artist did not show all the possibilities of decentralization but only its antipode. In his other work UUmwelt (2019), Huyghe visualizes the neural activities of participants after viewing a set of images in a way that could also be influenced by the physical condition of the exhibition space. These interactions between humans, animals, and technology play out without language but through intuition, emotion, and imagination. Notably, elements of this coevolving system merely create relations through haphazard effect and coincidence, which could also be viewed as the negation of a dominating intention. Huyghe was silent on the possibility of merged intentions. He stated that he is “not creating fiction but realities.” Indeed, reality teeming with coincidences and absurdities. But what if we still want to take a proactive approach towards reality by shaping it with different stakeholders under a shared but conflicting vision?

In an era of ecological upheaval, there is a perceived imperative for anthropocentric worlds to re-attune to other species and more-than-human ways of inhabiting our shared planet. Tomás Saraceno’s installation Algo(r)hmics ‘re-envisions spider webs as a channel of cosmic vibrations. The artist claims that the work opens channels of communication and sociality that cross the borders between senses and species. We can also see it as a model for training humans to communicate intuitively based on senses/feelings rather than language. It is a metaphor showing that everything is entangled in the webs of an ecosystem. Object-oriented ontology (OOO) claims that things, animals, and other nonhuman entities experience their existence in a way that lies outside of our species-centric definition of consciousness. It is difficult for humans to understand objects fully. Conversely it is also difficult for us, as human observers, to fully know ourselves. Saraceno’s work demonstrates the value of recognizing nonhumans’ subjectivity and modes of consciousness, validating connections in the world that are not anthropocentric. It allows us to introspect upon human communications and relationships using a nonhuman paradigm.

Science has focused on what can be perceived with our senses. Still, humans and other beings constantly transmit emotions, thoughts, and telepathic fields as an expression and extension of themselves, reaching into non-material realms. Ursula Biemann is an artist, writer, and video essayist based in Zurich. Acoustic Ocean (2018) is a semi-fictional account of an expedition to the depths of the Arctic Ocean in search of interspecies communication. Her portrayal of the marine biologist suggests a porosity and connectivity of the human body with regard to water and the many life forms it sustains. In 2017, Biemann started making contact with indigenous communities who inhabit the Amazonian rainforest. Her latest work, Forest Mind (2022), instantiates non-material connections. One of them is the metaphysics of plants and their telepathic communication. This work is about the intelligence of nature and the intelligence in nature, viewed from both a scientific and a shamanic perspective. From Western science, we know a lot more now about the ability of plants to sense, communicate and make decisions, sometimes with a similar complexity to that of a brain, so there is a growing recognition of plants as “sentient.” But for indigenous people in the Amazon, this intelligence goes much further. It’s a vital force that permeates all that exists, both visible and invisible entities, endowing them with awareness and meaning. Her
work pushes interspecies communications to an immaterial level. Ideally, humans can learn from nature by deconstructing the means and ends in natural phenomena and thus find forms, structures, and organizing principles replicable in the human realm. Nevertheless, from my perspective, this kind of learning reduces nature to modularized rational circuits. It neglects an essential form of communication between lifeforms: coevolution based on emotion and empathy.

Coevolution is not merely the aggregation of simultaneous evolutions. Empathy plays a crucial role in forging the relationships necessary for symbiosis, which is the precondition for coevolution.
In his book *All Art is Ecological*, Timothy Morton points out that “ecology” is not beautiful nature in the traditional sense; it does not care for humans. From this perspective, ecology is “dark.” It invites – or asks - us humans to find our place in the ecology, to consider our connection to a piece of iron ore, a snowflake, plankton, or a ray of light. Sonic Arts organized a series of artistic research and art-making events on this theme between 2014 and 2016 and exhibited them in Barents’s border region.

One of the works by Joris Strijbos, *IsoScope* (2015), is a constantly changing sonic cloud with rotating lights, together manifesting emergent behavior. Strijbos wanted to create an outdoor artificial phenomenon – an abstract sound-and-light entity – which, like most natural phenomena, can only be experienced under specific weather conditions. The work can be seen as a proposition for a new kind of mechanic and artificial life that can communicate with vital force permeating landscape non-life. It develops the ability of manufactured objects as a geographical legacy to communicate with the whole environment. But is it possible for species in the surrounding environment to understand this information? Should we explore the potential of arts to be understood by nonhuman agencies? Would the light and sound create disturbances?

**MOTIVATION FOR PROJECT “CALLING” (BUILDING RESONANT BRIDGES)**

Pierre Huyghe and Ursula Biemann’s works can be seen as an envisioning of the fluid boundaries between humans and nonhumans and as the audience shares their imagination by constructing a concrete fictional landscape. In my practice, I have taken a path similar to that of Tomás Saraceno. When faced with ecological problems, we are stuck in the deadlock of “humans and nature.” This binary setup may be the root cause of anthropocentrism, so what if we shift our attention to relationships between nonhumans? In other words, the relationship between natural components independent of human existence can present new perspectives for re-examining the relationship between humans and nature. At the same time, I hope to respond to my questions about Strijbos’ works through a landscape installation that explores the possibilities of surrounding species and understanding the information transmitted by the installation. Ultimately, I want to investigate the prospect of non-life (in this case, human-made artifacts as well as the landscape itself) being understood by nonhumans.

The opposite of anthropocentrism is not fixed like the views of ecocentrism or theocentric. To explore what the de-anthropocentric world might look like, I want to create a dynamic and shifting environment consisting of infrastructures that facilitate interspecies communication. For example, I wish to determine if I can stimulate new communications. I turned to the marsh and birds at Tillinghast to experiment with whether they could generate emotional connections. For this project, I set up a tide-driven sound installation made of ice, where the water movement in the marsh is translated to the sound of birds by shifting the airway in the installation. The changing rhythm of the water allows the installation to capture the bright or vibrant atmosphere of the marsh at midday and the more subdued mood at dusk. As the installation melts, the bird-like sounds gradually transform into the breathing of the marsh itself. Calling is like a cup phone that channels the sounds of “nature.” This installation aims to hear the silenced voices of our planet. Every subject in the environment is invited to wander through this sensory experience. I hope to build resonant bridges in nature that invite people to envisage the possibility of empathizing with non-human or non-living beings.

Because anthropocentrism/human-nonhuman communication is an open-ended subject, there is no defined paradigm. I chose ice as the installation material to minimize human intervention because the work aims to decentralize the human voice, so naturally, it should also reduce the author’s imposed mark on reality. The transience revealed by ice melting is an apt metaphor for this porous condition—the relationship between human beings and nature. Ecological issues can be seen as feedback to/ consequence of the traditional human way of communicating with nature. Therefore, we should see nature through a new scope, an experimentally cordial relation based on empathy and humility.

In addition, I expect the work not to bring a heavy ecological burden. When the work engages nature as an experimental field, it should a temporal

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intervention. I want to explore a different class of installations that are a re-presentation of natural occurrences (e.g., the sound installation made of ice can be seen as an ice cap formed of a stone in an undiscovered riverbank). It "could have" already existed in nature: and "must have" if given enough time into the past or future. Statistically speaking, everything that has the possibility of taking place will eventually happen in a long enough timeframe. Most installations do not occur under natural conditions and require human intervention and influence. By reproducing a certain potentiality or possibility, this project is not simply an intervention in the space it occupies but can also be seen as an integration of a remote space-time or a preview into the future. These natural occurrences might be an instantiation of the universe's meaningless and absurdities if they remained undiscovered in their original context. However, when brought to light, they can have artificial Black Swan events that can radically overturn existing paradigms we use to observe the world. Black Swan events refer to events that are highly unlikely to happen, but happen nonetheless and leave a major effect. Just like Calling may change the way people think about the difference between intervention and naturalness, artificial and natural objects. Unlike Andy Goldsworthy, who reveals the meaninglessness of chance, Calling is a coincidence pregnant with meaningful possibility. Admittedly, the project is an experimental attempt to ask new questions that may, in turn, raise controversy. For example, can birds interact with this installation? How can we observe the occurrence of empathy? There is no fixed answer to these questions because the explanatory power of science is limited in this field. However, I have some preliminary thoughts regarding these issues based on empirical observations. By using a 24-hour field camera placed next to the installation and watching the footage, I found that birds gathered around the installation more frequently when it made bird-like sounds (roughly 1.5 times more often than when it did not). When considering the model of the installation, I designed one part of the installation to be fragile so that an average bird weighing 37 to 54 grams could quickly stop the model from making a sound, leaving a fallback response in the case where a bird does not like the sound of the installation. However, I did not observe any attempt by a bird to destroy the installation. As observers, although our understanding of bird behavior is hardly immune to human self-projection, the curiosity shown by birds seems to signal the beginnings of relatability and communication. The inquisitiveness shown by birds demonstrates an attempt to figure out or interact with the marsh. As the field experiments progress, this swamp may become the frontier site of disconnection between human knowledge and the knowledge of other life forms. Positioning the art world as the aesthetic human activity, defining creation as the creation of man, and defining the art museum as a human-built space, are all based on the nature-society dichotomy. If we are to move toward a benevolent Anthropocene, we should define art as the aesthetics of the earth, creation as all-inclusive, and our cultural institutions as sites—or hosts to the museum as the space of all things.

A SERIES OF WORKS RELATED TO ICE

When considering the terms of artistic intervention with nature, most installations do not occur under natural conditions and require human intervention and influence. In this series of work, I explore a new realm that lies between nature and art, redistributing attention to the potentiality of the natural world with its own unfolding phenomena. I approach nature as an experimental field with non-human time scales. Such diverse time perspectives offer different time narratives that speak to naturalness. Here the focus is on ice as a material that is always in a state of flux.
ICE: SOLAR ETCHINGS

Version 1

Site-specific installation. Ice. Variable size.

The work is recorded as a 4K resolution video with audio, using both digital and Super 8 cameras. 3 minutes

Sited along the Mill River near New Haven, Connecticut, the video captures the environmental sounds and the moving trajectory of the sun and the weather through an ice lens. Operating as a drawing tool, the focal point of the ice lens (formed from the river water) etches the paths of movement as textural impressions on paper. As the ice breaks and melts, the arc reaches its end, and the sun sets. The water then returns to the river, leaving behind the arc as the sole remnant.

As a tangible and temporal representation, the drawing acts as a form of data visualization, yet it does not contain any electronic components. The audience can intuitively imagine the weather fluctuation of that day from the documentation of these dynamic contours.

Ice: Solar Etchings – Arc drawn by the sun through a glass lens
Left: Ice: Solar Etchings - Art drawn by the sun through an ice lens
Right: Ice: Solar Etchings - Fragment of an ice lens after cracking due to temperature difference
Ice: Solar Etchings - Ice lens broken into fragments

Ice: Solar Etchings - Water is taken from the river to make an ice lens, the fragments of which end up melting in the river.
Ice: Solar Etchings

- Ice lens focus-distance experiment
Ice: Solar Etchings - Ice lens focus distance experiment recorded with super 8 film
SPECIAL THANKS TO BILL COVITZ FOR HIS GENEROUS HELP IN CRAFTING THE PERFECT ICE LENS. WITHOUT HIM, MY VISION WOULD HAVE BEEN IMPOSSIBLE TO REALIZE.
Huanzhe Hu
MFA Digital + Media 2023

Ice: Solar Etchings
Ice, paper, mirror

Sited along the Mill River near New Haven, Connecticut, the video captures the environmental sounds and the moving trajectory of the sun and the weather through an ice lens. Operating as a drawing tool, the focal point of the ice lens (formed from the river water) etches the paths of movement as textural impressions on paper. As the ice breaks and melts, the arc reaches, expands, and the sun sets. The water then returns to the river, leaving behind the arc as the sole remnant.

As a tangible and temporal representation, the drawing acts as a form of data visualization, yet it does not contain any electronic components. The audience can intuitively imagine the weather fluctuation of that day from the documentation of these dynamic contours.

Huanzhe Hu
MFA Digital + Media 2023

Ice: Solar Captures
Ice

Using a camera with an ice lens, the video records the movement of the sun throughout the day, freezing its path from sunrise to sunset. As the ice lens slowly melts, the images shift between moments of clarity toward obscurity.

Each hour the camera captures a new frame, which is then stitched together to create a time lapse video.
ICE: SOLAR CAPTURES

Site-specific installation at Providence. Ice, cyanotype paper and handmade shredded fill paper camera. 2023. The work is recorded as a high resolution video and photographs.

Video

Using a camera with an ice lens, the video records the movement of the sun throughout the day, tracing its path from sunrise to sunset. As the ice lens slowly melts, the images shift between moments of clarity toward obscurity.

Each hour, the camera captures a new frame, which is then stitched together to create a time-lapse video.

Photographs

Exploiting the changes in the refraction of light during the melting of the ice, at regular half-hour intervals, I place a sheet of cyanotype paper in my self-made camera. Over eight hours, as the lens deforms, the images constellate as fragile-like apparitions. At the same time, the water from the melting ice lens washes over the cyanotype paper and completes the development. We know that the image will fade, and the ice will melt. The gradual disappearance of the image from vision, memory and life is implicit in this temporal document.
Ice: Solar Captures—Photographs taken with the Ice Lens camera.
Ice: Solar Capture—Photographs taken with the Ice Lenses camera.
Ice: Solar Captures - Video screenshots taken with the Ice Lense camera.
CALLING

* Site-specific sound installation. Ice. Variable size. The work is recorded as a 3’39 4K resolution video with audio.

Through the installation Calling, the artist creates a unique auditory experience that serves as an emotional bridge between the marshland and its avian inhabitants. Constructed entirely from ice, this tide-driven sound installation resembles an ice cap that has formed on a stone in a riverbank, eventually drawn to the flow of water.

The installation uses a series of ice caps of varying sizes scattered throughout the marsh to capture the movement of water and translate it into the sound of birds through specially designed airways. These bird-like sounds capture the various moods of the marsh throughout the day, from the vibrant energy of midday to the more subdued tones of dusk. Due to the nature of bird language, this rhythmic movement generated by water has an emotional resonance for birds as well. In the gradual melting of the installation, the bird-like sounds seamlessly transition into the natural breathing of the marsh itself, until the installation disappears entirely into the water.

Calling can be seen as a cup phone that connects us with the usually inaudible movement of water, and facilitates potential communication with non-human beings. By inviting us to hear the silenced voices of our planet, this installation challenges us to empathize with the non-human and non-living entities that share our world.
Calling - Field experiment – observing the response of birds to the sound made by the installation.
Site-specific installation for Reykjavík, Iceland
Pancake ice, Cement, Electronic components.
Ongoing

Drifting is a proposed installation, the body of the installation will be similar to a record player, only it can be used to play pancake ice—a stunning natural phenomenon: fragile circular discs with raised edges that form when water freezes and fragments of ice flow and rotate with the currents. This installation restores to an extent the sound created by the delicate collision and rotation of the pancake ice during their formation, providing an immersive and captivating experience for visitors through spatialized audio.

Drifting is an installation that engages viewers with nuanced sounds of drifting ice. It’s an invitation to connect with nature through the power of sound spatialization technology and field recordings of natural soundscapes. Drifting highlights the “powerful, visceral connection” that exists between ourselves and frozen landscapes. By highlighting their fragility, this installation encourages viewers to re-evaluate the relationship between humans and nature, and explore new ethical frameworks.

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18. Michiel Korthals, Humanity in the Living, the Living in Humans, The International Li brary of Environmental, Agricultural and Food Ethics book series, LEAF Volume 33.


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A thesis presented by Huanzhe Hu, in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Master of Fine Arts in the Digital + Media in the Department of Digital + Media at Rhode Island School of Design in Providence, Rhode Island.

It has been approved by the Master's Examination Committee:

TO MELT

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