“ACTIVATING MATERIALITIES: IDENTIFYING STRATEGIES OF ACCEPTABLE LOSS WHEN REMEDIATING MUSEUM OBJECTS ONLINE” by Jane Thaler

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Committee:

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Abstract:
Museums have specialized in the onsite exhibition of non-digital collection objects for hundreds of years but have yet to achieve similar levels of expertise, engagement, and interest in online venues across the industry. Although they were early adopters of digital communication technologies, museums have since become complacent about producing exceptional online content or hesitant to implement innovative approaches to online public engagement. Museums were forced to confront this lack of stimulating, online public offerings when the COVID-19 pandemic closed the doors of cultural heritage institutions around the world in 2020. Within months, online programming and exhibitions needed to be adapted, created, and advertised with great urgency to accommodate the institutions’ engagement missions through web-based technologies. In this dissertation, I investigate how three types of museums, all part of the Carnegie Museums of Pittsburgh, digitally enacted onsite object programming and exhibition through online means during the 2020 museum closures. Specifically, this study examines how and why the social and material capacities of objects, practices, and mediation strategies are differently activated by these institutions when objects were remediated through an online platform. To understand the consequences of moving these object interactions online, I first consider the historical, institutional, and object-centered conditions that produced the original onsite enactments before moving to a study of which aspects of these site-based object engagements were transferred online, and which were left behind. I argue that cultural heritage workers need to actively acknowledge what sociomaterial affordances they are giving up in favor of others—a determination I refer to as the threshold for acceptable loss—when adopting online object-based mediation strategies to set realistic expectations of the audience experience and to understand the educational and experiential impact of using certain representational systems when digitally mediating museum objects.