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THE NEW
INSTITUTE
Centre for Environmental
Humanities (NICHE)
at Ca' Foscari
University of Venice

14 February 2023
h. 9.30-12.00 am
Ca' Bottacin
Venice

Tone Walford, University College London **Big Tech and Environmental Science: the data territories of the Post-Environmental Condition**

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I will trace out one shift in the emergence of what I am calling, after Jenny Reardon, “the post-environmental condition” - a shift in the environmental sciences characterised by the implementation of transnational databases and data infrastructures, ‘automated’ data collection or, as Microsoft puts it, “Instrumenting the Earth”, ocean floor sensor arrays, constant satellite surveillance, and modeling. It is also marked by emergent relations between big tech companies and environmental science, and by the opening up of a speculative financial space as environmental data becomes more and more valuable for investors spooked by the crisis talk of extreme weather events linked to climate change. It is coloured by risk calculation and simulated predictions becoming a means of governance, but also a sort of cybernetic imaginary where the whole world is enervated. At the same time, alongside this planetary-scale informational cosmos, over the past few

decades, we have seen a renewed interest in citizens science projects which are using grass-roots data to make local claims about environmental issues, pollution, toxic poisoning and so on. We have also seen data activists take to the screen to save environmental data on news that Trump was coming to office. In this emergent multi-scalar landscape of data-driven environmental engagement, I will focus in this paper on the flourishing relationships between Big Tech (Google, Microsoft, Intel) and environmental science, and the imaginaries and infrastructures that sustain them. I will ask how traditional methodologies for measuring the natural world in the natural sciences are being cross-pollinated by the contemporary turn to “Big Data” as a planetary social panacea, and trace out a critical history of measurement and territory within which to ground and frame that relationship today.

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