

The Post Carbon Artist

Artistic Collaboration and the Post Carbon Transition

by D'Arcy Reynolds, MA

Introduction

I first heard about peak oil¹ in 2005. My long-time friend, Alice Friedemann, was deeply involved in the peak oil movement, and was on the lecture circuit and writing numerous articles on the subject. Alice proceeded to educate me about peak oil, and my life was forever changed. There was a clear dividing line - *before* peak oil, and *after* peak oil.

At the time, I was a composer living in the Sierras writing music, fulfilling commissions, and pursuing residencies. I was living near Terry Riley, and easily able to continue my long-time study of North Indian raga with him. In 2005, I'd received a Meet the Composer 'Global Connections' grant to travel to South Africa for concerts and to work with a documentary filmmaker to create a film featuring my music.

This was a deeply satisfying life on a very personal level.

However, once I knew about peak oil and had an inkling of what life would be like after the supply of oil would be substantially diminished, I was so strongly impacted by the knowledge of this impending sea change that I couldn't continue on as before. My emotional response to peak oil has evolved over time, shifting from shock, to grief, to fear, to acceptance (sometimes), back to fear, and so on. It's like any grieving process, it has a life of its own and it changes over time.

Learning about peak oil, and having such a strong emotional response to the problem became 'a call to arms' for me. I felt that I needed to return to the Bay Area and get involved in being part of the sustainability movement in some way. And rather than getting immobilized by fear or hopelessness, I've intentionally chosen to focus on solutions - being pro-active in working towards developing positive future scenarios involving community and collaboration.

As an artist, this has not been an easy transition. Each day the question of integrating music into this new world view is part of my daily koan. How do I fulfill my artistic and creative life while I participate in a meaningful way in building a sustainable life, and contributing to the transformation and adaptation needed to prepare for peak oil?

It is this question that led me to the idea of a Post Carbon² Artist. I think that artists can build awareness about peak oil and help to create the cultural shift needed for post carbon living. At the time that this idea came to me, I wasn't aware of any artists that focused on peak oil and post carbon, but I thought it would be a good idea for artists to engage with these issues.

It seems to me that the importance of the post carbon shift and the impact of our global culture on our environment is of such tremendous significance, that everyone needs to pitch in to

¹ Peak oil refers to the world's oil supply reaching its peak, so that there is a diminishing supply along with increasing demand, which will lead to exorbitant prices and inadequate supply for our current lifestyle.

² Post carbon refers to life after the carbon-emitting fossil fuels (oil, gas, coal) are no longer readily available.

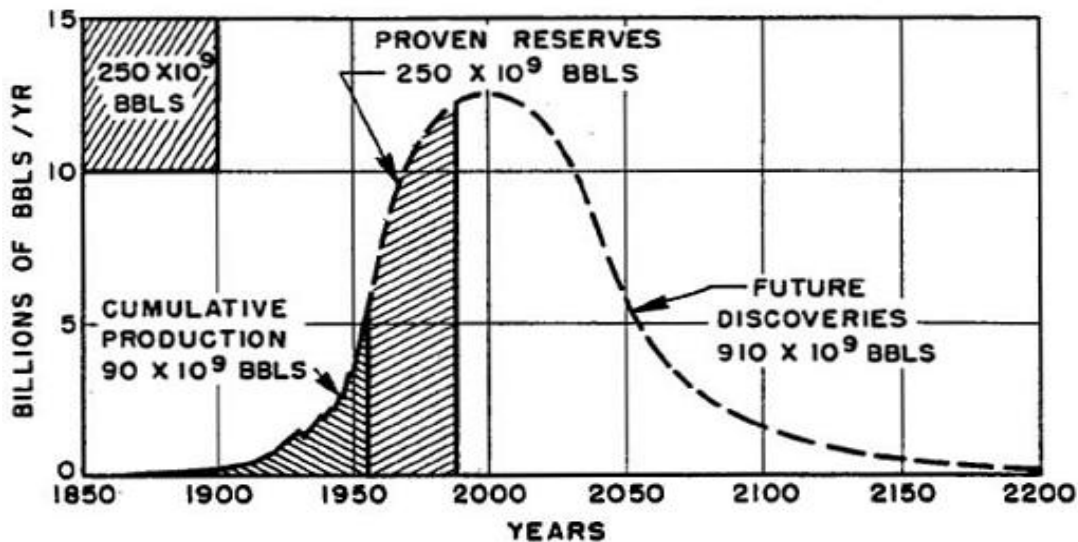
contribute to the solutions. As artists, we can't just stay in our studios, but need to engage with these issues, and use our art in service of this larger mission. This might also include learning to farm, educating the public, building community, and getting involved in urban planning so there is land available to grow our food.

While artists cannot solve all of these problems, we can be actively involved in raising awareness and helping to create solutions. This is a major cultural shift, and the arts can help to usher in a new society based on community, cooperation, and futuristic thinking that moves us forward from our current paradigm into a life/planet honoring way of living.

More About Peak Oil

The peak oil theory was developed by King Hubbert in the 1950's. Hubbert asserted that the easily accessible oil would peak in the US in the 1970's. Peak oil would then occur throughout the world in the early part of the 21st century. In peak oil, the demand begins to exceed the supply, and as the demand continues to grow and the supply diminishes, oil becomes very expensive and eventually available only on a very limited basis.

History proved Hubbert to be correct in his assessment of the U.S. peak oil date, and it's not yet clear when global oil production will reach its peak. Some estimates suggest that point won't arrive until the 2020's' others indicate that peak oil is imminent, and some experts believe we may have reached that point already.



Hubbert's Peak of Global Oil Production and Discoveries

There are various scenarios about the impact of peak oil, many of which are extremely dire. A severe supply and demand imbalance could create a global depression that could lead to the collapse of the global economy. When we consider that oil and supplies from the petrochemical

industry weave through the entire fabric of our economy, there are definitely going to be some major shocks!

Post Carbon Living

It is likely that peak oil will cause us to live in a ‘post carbon world’ some time in the next few decades. Post carbon refers to a future without fossil fuels. All fossil fuels such as oil, natural gas, and coal contain carbon, and once these natural resources are depleted, then we will be entering the ‘post carbon age’.

The post carbon lifestyle that many predict is one where communities are localized, and are no longer dependent upon the oil industry, the mega-corporate conglomerate of big box stores, and agribusiness. There would be local organic agriculture, small gardens, local business, stronger communities, and perhaps a move toward more of a trade and barter system.

This issue of adaptation to peak oil conditions was clearly addressed by Cuba in the early 1990’s. In the documentary, *The Power of Community – How Cuba Survived Peak Oil*³, the world is given a first rate example of how life will change in a post carbon scenario. Cuba’s oil supply was cut off when Russia fell, which led to food and water shortages, power outages, and lack of transportation. Agriculture was also severely impacted - the petrochemical industry supplied the fertilizers, the diesel for the tractors, and seeds, which were shipped from around the globe.

Cuba was forced to go through a radical socio-economic restructuring that included training thousands of new farmers, changing land use policies to encourage urban agriculture, food and water rationing, and the importation of thousands of bicycles to replace their cars.

The adaptive strategies that Cuba used for their post carbon lifestyle is something that we can all learn from as we look toward the post carbon future.

This new way of living is not based on the consumer driven society that we know today – it is not predicated on constant growth. It is in fact, the opposite. Using less, reusing and recycling what we have, and completely retrofitting our socio-economic system to adapt to a world that does not revolve around consumption.

At the heart of the matter is the need to grow and supply food to a population that will no longer be served by large-scale agri-business. Small organic farms and small gardens that maximize production with minimum resources will be of vital importance.

Clearly, this kind of radical shift has huge implications for how we will be living in the Bay Area. What can we do to prepare? What kind of training programs can we put in place for farming? How do we retrofit businesses to adapt to localize communities? How can people be convinced to shift to a low-consumption lifestyle? Can we make the post carbon transition?

³ *The Power of Community: How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* (2006 documentary produced by Community Service, Inc.)

Searching for Answers

I started out my quest to answer these questions by looking for organizations that were involved in post carbon and localization initiatives. I found several organizations in the Bay Area whose missions revolve around finding answers to these questions, including the Business Alliance for Local Living Economies (BALLE), the Post Carbon Institute, the Transition Towns initiative, and Bay Localize. For the most part, these NGO'S have created networks that promote localization initiatives that strengthen local communities and promote self-sustaining local economies.

I also discovered The Pachamama Alliance which is 'changing the dream' of the western world through its powerful multi-media symposium. The premise is that we need to change our consciousness from 'business as usual' to an environmentally sustainable, socially just, and spiritually fulfilling human presence on this planet. In this way, we will be able to move forward in a cooperative and collaborative mode to solve these problems together. They provide a very positive spin on the solution, with a strong emphasis on environmental and social justice.

The next step for me was to find out what artists were already working with the post carbon challenge.

What Post Carbon Artists Are Doing Now

I wanted to find artists in the Bay Area so I could learn more about how artists might be working in this area, and how we might work together. I met artists from several disciplines, and I've provided some examples of their work here:

Beth Grossman is an environmental artist living in Brisbane, CA who has an evolving interest in the Post Carbon Artist movement. Her work is interactive, and relies heavily on public participation with people who share their personal reflections and stories as a part of the artistic process.

Beth believes that there is a tipping point at which people will be moved to action, and by working with people on a very personal level, she is able to engage them in environmental issues by collecting stories and listening in a very effective way. Beth has done some very impactful work in the climate change arena, and I recently spoke with her about how she might address peak oil and post carbon issues in her work.

She emphasized the importance of accessibility and providing the public with a point of entry. Beth uses an intriguing focal point to attract attention, and the public approaches her work with curiosity and interest. The post carbon piece that she proposed used a classic car as its centerpiece to draw people into conversations about the car and the collective American Dream. The idea would be to reminisce about the car and our experiences of the 'carbon age', while at the same time acknowledging the end of this phase in our history. From here, she would engage the public in creating a recorded and visual new vision for a Post Carbon World.

The collection of personal stories and new visions would be made into a sound piece that would be shown publicly at transportation hubs, such as airports or train and bus stations, with visuals of the highlights of the industrial period. Cars, trucks, skyscrapers, power plants, factories in

juxtaposition with images of new technologies for producing energy and the precious nature that is preserved.

Alli Star is based in Oakland, and is a co-founder of Art in Action. She founded Dancers Without Borders; Another World is Possible Road Shows, and Art and Revolution, a national movement of artist-activists committed to revitalizing social movements through art and creative expression.

Art in Action empowers youth leaders by engaging arts for social change through personal, social, political, and cultural education. They work collectively with youth from diverse historically disenfranchised communities impacted by violence through programs in music, media arts, spoken word/poetry, dance/theater, storytelling, and painting.

Allison Quaid is the executive director of Creative Eco-Catalysts, and works with a wide range of for-profit and social profits using the arts to effect broader cultural change related to the environment. Her work creating public/private partnerships and developing local alliances are a key element in her new role in the edutainment industry.

Most recently, she has partnered with ClearVision and the Population Media Center to facilitate the creation of a new TV series that will focus on the adaptation needed to address both global warming and post carbon lifestyles. The characters will model a more community oriented, spiritually centered relationship to our planet, using the Sabido edutainment⁴ method that works at the fundamental level of societal attitudes and behaviors.

Aaron Ezra Ableman is a poet and environmental activist living in Oakland. His involvement with developing a post carbon society focuses on the arts, youth, education, and community gardens. Aaron grew up at "The Center for Urban Agriculture" in California with shovels, peaches, harmonicas, and a 'bioneering' family.

Aaron's poetry reflects his broad interests in art and ecology, and the role of the 'artist as farmer' comes through his poem:

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**Who are Are-tist?**

By Aaron Ezra Ableman

We are the ones we Art  
And- 'have been'- waiting for.

Closer than we are, we appear:  
objects in the karma mirror,  
reflected like light on water,

The path of wind on sand,

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<sup>4</sup> Miguel Sabido is the 'father' of entertainment education (EE) using serials to model change for large populations around the world. ClearVision ([clearvisioninst.org](http://clearvisioninst.org)) is convinced that EE is the most effective strategy for bringing about rapid, positive social change on many crucial issues facing America.

edged by intuition,  
spaced by the between,

Traced by the saints' sayings,  
played by the music makings,  
graced by cave paintings,

We are the sea and the shore,  
the dance and the dancer,  
the chance of the answer,

The art of physics in spirit,  
the heart of mystics, don't fear it,  
the chart of business endeared with

A new economic ecology,  
based on true energetic equality,  
exchanging seeds, health, and quality

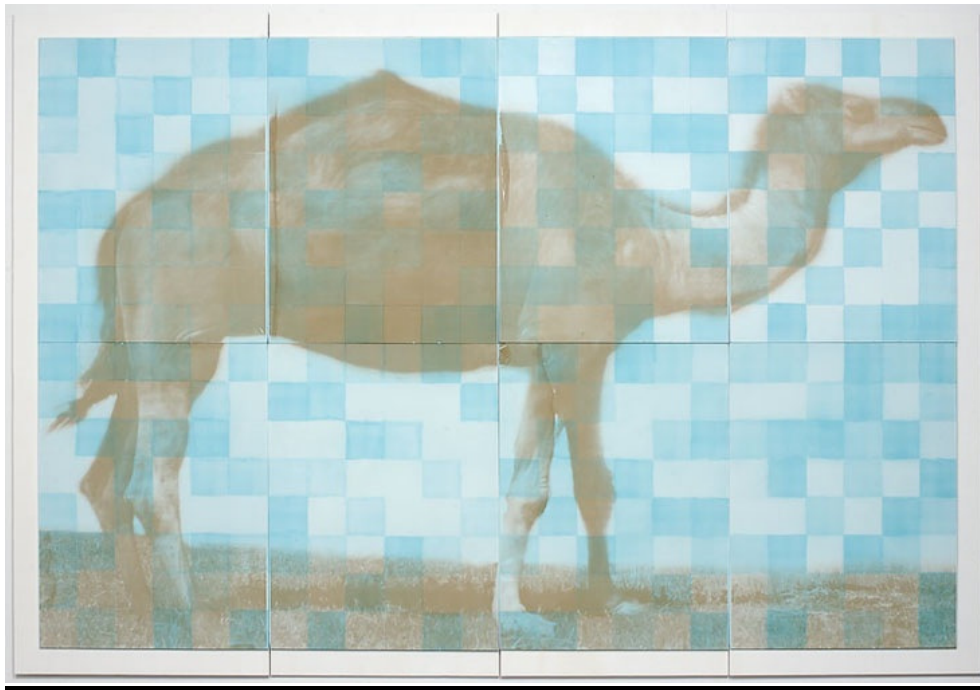
Of life, community, and wisdom,  
the farmers become artists become  
ecosystems without the ego systems,

We are the interwoven fabric  
connected beyond struggle and tragic  
the germination of magic.

We are the ones we Are  
And 'have been' waiting for.

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The visual artist, Kadie Salfi, has worked with the themes of metamorphosis, change, and evolution over the last two decades. In her latest body of work, titled "Arabian Camels & Crude Oil," Salfi explores peak oil and post carbon issues. In Salfi's notes she describes our conscious depletion of the oil supply and the lack of awareness of many oil producers about the impact that oil has on the environment.



“Arabian Camel” (2007), Kadie Salfi

“Arabian Camel” (2007) is crude oil on dyed plaster and is a life size photographic image of a dromedary camel. The image is comprised of eight 4’ x 3’ plaster slabs connected together to create a 12’ x 8’ surface. Crude oil is unrefined petroleum in its natural form, and it is the basis for gasoline, engine diesel oil, kerosene, and other petroleum-based products

This piece is so evocative, not in the least because it is a life-size image of a camel. I think that the emotional impact of the piece causes the viewer to reflect on the oil industry from a humanistic point of view. The post carbon message is a sub-text that underlies the piece ... the dwindling oil supply, and the impact of the oil industry on our daily life.

Post Carbon Artist Salons

I also wanted to get input from artists, environmentalists, and sustainability experts to see what emergent thinking that would evolve as we talked about peak oil and post carbon issues. We had three Post Carbon Artist events, and we used conversation mapping⁵ to capture the viewpoints of the participants so everyone could respond to each other's comments and develop the ideas further.

There was an eclectic mix of participants: the artists at the salons represented music, film, poetry, dance, and environmental art. In addition we had numerous organizations from a broad cross-section of disciplines:

Environmental Protection Agency
Institute at the Golden Gate
The Harrison Studio
HDR Inc. (Architecture and Engineering)
Zaccho Dance Theatre
Eternal Groove Productions
Post Carbon Marin
Planet Express Company

Art in Action
Green for All
The Pachamama Alliance
Creative Eco-Catalysts
Urban Alliance for Sustainability
Green MBA Dominican University
Bureau of Atmospheric Anecdota

The first conversation map was created at the Arts & Environmental Initiative, sponsored by California Lawyers for the Arts in November at Fort Mason in San Francisco. The two Post Carbon Artist salons were held at Dominican University and the San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Center. We viewed a portion of the documentary *The Power of Community – How Cuba Survived Peak Oil* to set the stage for the conversation mapping process.

There were three main topics that we discussed:

- How artists can build awareness about post carbon adaptation
- Funding for these initiatives
- Future post carbon scenarios

What Artists Can Do

Here's a 'to do list' of possible actions that came out of our discussions for artists to build awareness about post carbon adaptation:

Arts Programs:

- Community based arts programs with education for all ages will create awareness and initiatives for change.
- Major artists can use name and influence to garner support of business, govt and funding.
- New works and festivals centered on post carbon, including regional hip-hop theatre, improvisation, performance art, and eco-art.

⁵ Conversation mapping is a process used to collect ideas from a diverse group of people through a written interactive conversation.

Here are some ideas about how artists can fund our Post Carbon Art:

- Connect with existing companies and organizations, especially high tech and activist, to develop funded partnerships.
- Collaborative fund raising initiatives with sustainability organizations.
- Individual donor asks
- Entrepreneurship opportunities: microfinance, think tanks, new technology, and linking urban entrepreneurs with the arts.
- Raise money online with a Kiva/ChipIn model. A few YouTube videos, a simple web site to get started with capturing viral media attention.

The Role of Arts Organizations, Foundations, Business, and Government

As the Post Carbon Artist is part of a new frontier, it will take some time for arts organizations and foundations to get to know and understand this complex initiative. It is multi-dimensional, and will require a broader and more flexible concept of the art that will be produced and funded. As there is crossover with the current environmental arts movement⁶, it is also important that the focus on post carbon is clearly delineated in programs and funding.

Here are some of the recommendations made in the salons about what arts organizations, foundations, and business might do to further Post Carbon Arts projects:

Arts organizations

- Create interdisciplinary post carbon arts programs
- Develop varied foundation, business, NGO alliances to create funding base for post carbon arts.
- Partner with BALLE, Post Carbon Institute, and Transition Towns

Foundations

- Allocate funds for post carbon art
- Expand the concept of the 'artist' for foundations' programs to include interactive and conceptual art.
- Support urban arts activists in programs such as Art in Action
- Seek funding from the Clinton Global Initiative, Gore's Alliance for Climate Protection, and Obama's green initiatives.

Business

- Integrate post carbon art into companies with corporate funding to shift employee attitudes.
- Fund important post carbon arts initiatives that will impact adaptation.

Government

- Partnerships with artists to develop communication strategies for post carbon transition.

⁶ Check out these websites for more information about organizations committed to using the arts and media to create positive environmental impacts: greenmuseum.org, ecoartsonline.org, artintoaction.org, eco-catalysts.org, bettybiodiesel.org, clearvisioninst.org, populationmedia.org/issues.

Future Scenario Generation

I thought that the salons would be a good opportunity to create some future scenarios for a post carbon world. This is definitely a good time to do some out-of-the-box thinking about alternative futures!

There was an interesting commentary on Wikipedia about the need to develop complex futures, and the need for a ‘revolution in the production of utopias’:

*“Today we need powerful new utopian and anti-utopian concepts that look forward to super-industrialism, rather than backward to simpler societies. These concepts, however, can no longer be produced in the old way. First, no book, by itself, is adequate to describe a super-industrial future in emotionally compelling terms. Each conception of a super-industrial utopia or anti-utopia needs to be embodied in many forms - films, plays, novels and works of art - rather than a single work of fiction. Second, it may now be too difficult for any individual writer, no matter how gifted, to describe a convincingly complex future. We need, therefore, a revolution in the production of utopias: collaborative utopianism. We need to construct ‘utopia factories’ ”.*⁷

The future scenarios that evolved in the salons are just a beginning. I hope that numerous salons and art developing alternative futures will occur around the Bay Area. Here are some of futures from the salons:

Local arts

- We’ll have strong neighborhood arts scenes with salons and open studios
- There will be more murals in neighborhoods
- Community arts centers will become an even more vital resource.
- Recycled instruments & natural art products and crafts will be created.

Media

- The momentum of the post carbon movement will accelerate with the involvement of well-known artists who have strong ties to government and media, such as the poet laureates and Hollywood/Independent writers and actors.

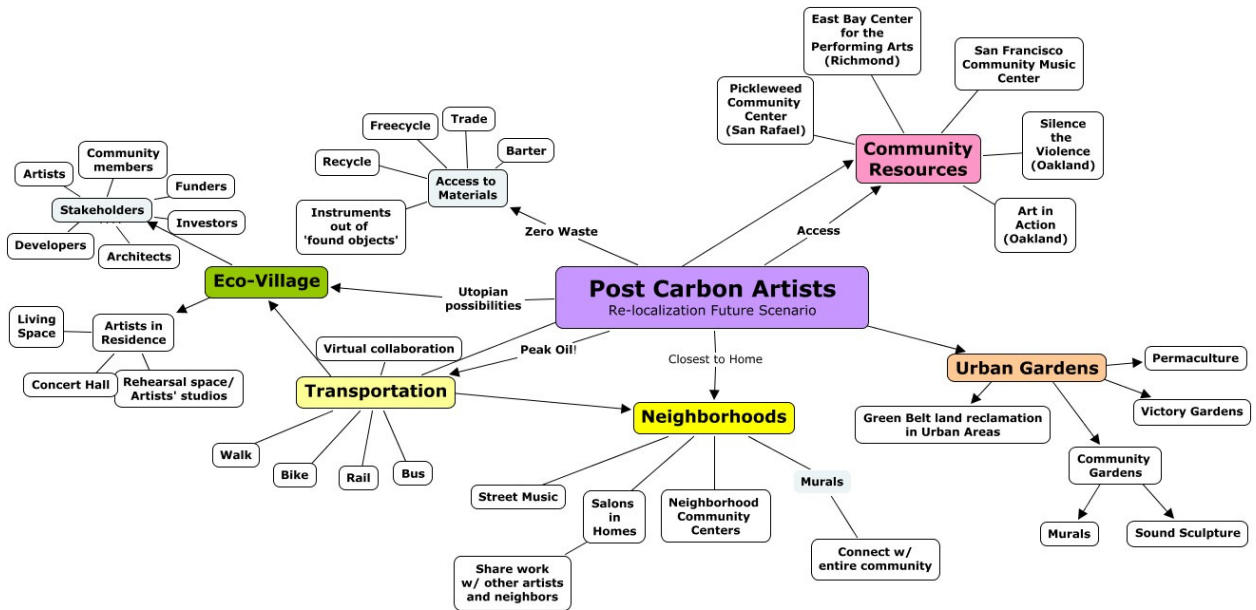
Awareness

- A relationally-based society will evolve (away from a consumer-based society) that honors our interconnectedness in society and through the arts.
- Personal transformation and awareness will be created through the arts.

Community

- Localized community and co-housing with arts facilities will be the norm.
- Reconnecting to community and nature will be the cornerstone of post carbon society.
- Communal living – live/work/play together – no more vehicles!

⁷ Wikipedia Pre-industrial search.



Mind Map
Post Carbon Artist Project
D'Arcy Reynolds, 2008

Mind map of 'Utopian Post Carbon Future Scenario'

Social Justice

- Art projects will wake people up and provide hope, while transforming the worldview of the privileged will address long standing social justice issues here in the Bay Area.
- Collaboration and connection between socio-economic groups will lead to cooperative learning and prevent social upheaval during the Big Shift to post carbon living.
- The arts will be seen as a powerful force on the grass roots level to support community level action: influencing social justice initiatives and access to resources and the arts, while conveying the consciousness of equity and opportunity throughout the social fabric of the Bay Area.

Education

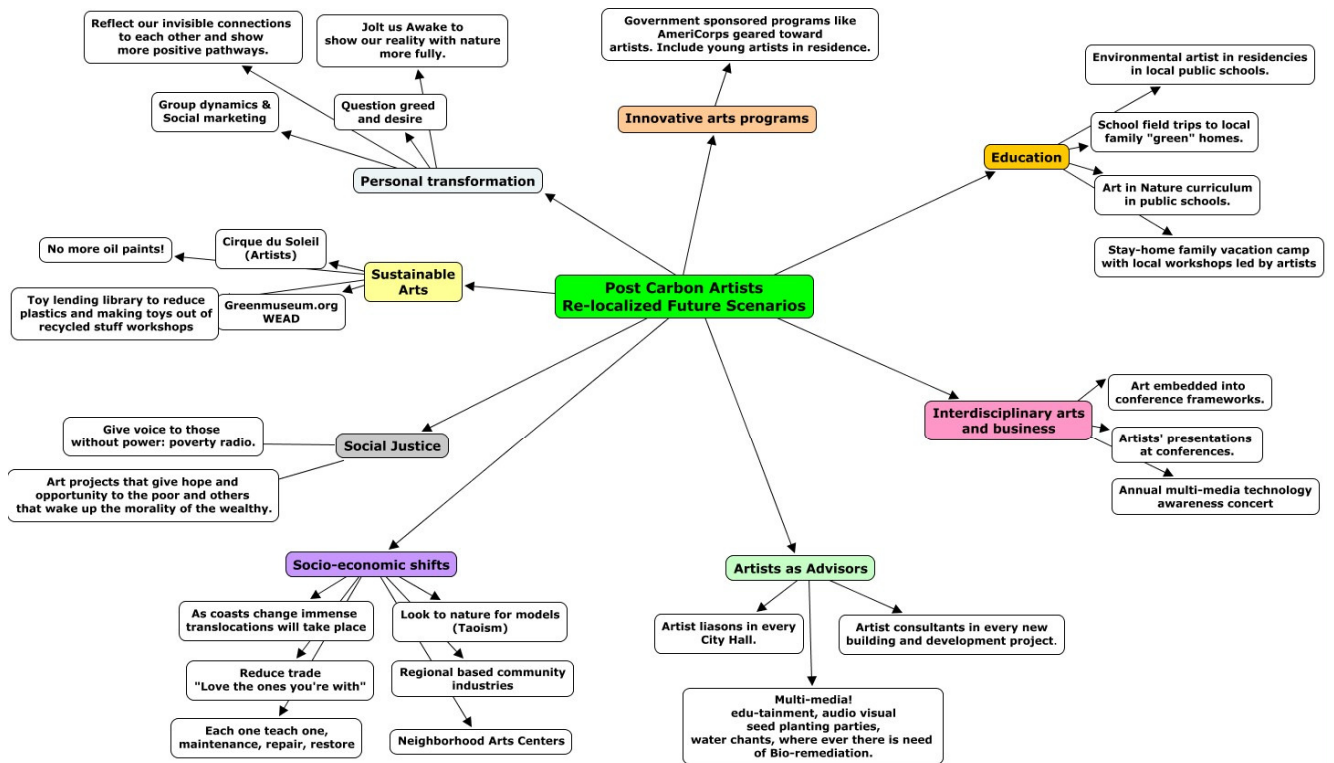
- Socio-economic shifts to localized carbon neutral towns, and a society that holds education in high regard with a sustainable relationship to the material world.

Technology

- 19th century lifestyle with 21st century know-how with new technologies for extracting water using eco-art design.

Agriculture

- There will be organic community gardens and urban gardens in vacant lots with murals, with eco-tours to raise funds for gardens.



San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Center
 Post Carbon Artist Salon
 12/03/08

San Francisco Planning and Urban Research Center 'Future Scenario' Conversation Map

Collaboration

- The arts will be threaded through this future world through art-in-nature programs, arts imbedded in business, social profits, and conferences.
- Post Carbon arts will be an integral part of government and public relations initiative

Conclusions

The Post Carbon Artist initiative is a creative response to the severity and urgency of the challenges that are presented by the peak oil phenomenon. There is a modest amount of Post Carbon Art being created today in the form of conceptual art, arts activism, poetry, spoken word, music, and visual arts. I think that scaling up the awareness about peak oil in the arts community could create a powerful artistic response and a lot of new art that will have a strong impact on our culture.

I've been thinking about this for many months, and I've spoken with a lot of people about the most effective ways to approach Post Carbon Arts programs. Here are five strategies that I believe could have a big impact on the arts community and also the broader culture:

- 1) Create a short and impactful video to educate and inspire artists, and distribute the link in such a way that it 'goes viral'. This could get post carbon more broadly understood and motivate artists to create new works.
- 2) Create a pilot program here in the Bay Area that links local government, arts organizations, artists, and youth. We could design an interdisciplinary arts program that focuses on youth creating new works in a collaboration with established artists, and draw upon established organizations such as Youth Speaks. The new works could be part of an Earth Day celebration.
- 3) Develop a communication strategy using Post Carbon Art to reach the broader population around the importance of peak oil, and link the communication and messaging to energy conservation, transportation, and localization initiatives. This could be done in conjunction with government, business (like PG&E), arts organizations, and foundations. This is an innovative and effective way to approach a mass form of communication that could easily go viral given Internet technologies such as YouTube and social networking sites.
- 4) Develop a clearly defined outreach campaign with well-known artists who have a commitment to environmental issues. Bringing about awareness of peak oil, and the transition to post carbon at the highest level of the entertainment industry could reap great rewards if a few individuals decided to endorse adaptation (such as the Transition Towns initiative) through their work.
- 5) Lobby government agencies for post carbon art funding and to create inter-agency alliances (such as EPA and NEA). The U.S. Federal Arts Project in the 1930's is an example of federal funding that impacted the arts on a national level, and was used as an effective communication tool for government initiatives

Developing strong Post Carbon Arts programs with clear objectives, deliverables, and assessment metrics could garner funding, even in this economic climate. While I think that foundations and arts organizations will be challenged by the breadth and scope of Post Carbon Art, I hope that programs and funding for these new works will become available through an expanded understanding and framework. Post Carbon Art is broad in nature and it doesn't necessarily fit into art as 'physical object', or music as 'score to be performed in concert hall'. This points to the need to break down boundaries and look more at interdisciplinary and conceptual works.

It will be interesting to see what develops in terms of the interest and support from government, business, foundations, arts organizations and non-profits over the next several years. Hopefully, as artists become aware of peak oil, there will be an exponential increase in the number of artists that decide to take this on and incorporate the post carbon message into their work. Collaborative programs between government, business, and the arts will be a vital element in these next critical years to build awareness, strengthen community, and spur localization.

D'Arcy Reynolds is a composer living in the Bay Area, and has received numerous commissions and prizes from the American Composers Forum, Meet the Composer, ASCAP, and the American Music Center. D'Arcy is the founding director of the San Francisco Chapter of the American Composers Forum, and is currently composing a new work based on the shift to a 'post carbon world' for her composer residency at the San Francisco Community Music Center.

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