

## Strategic Plan 2004–2007



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## List of Programs

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#### Art Mentoring

*With an emphasis on visual storytelling, our core art mentoring programs include:*

- **Photography**

*Standard and digital, documentary projects, traditional and digital darkroom*

- **Digital Media Arts**

*Filmmaking from concept development through editing, digital arts including animation, web design, photo imaging, and illustration*

- **Art Discovery**

*Multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary workshops for 6 to 9 year old children, giving them the opportunity to explore a range of art media*

#### ArtPartners

*Bringing our Art Mentoring programs to the places where young people live, learn, and play including housing projects, schools, parks, and human service organizations*

#### Demonstration Visual Art Classrooms

*Weekly, standards-based visual art lessons for elementary school students; concurrent training of teachers on implementing the curricula in subsequent years*

#### Venice Arts Gallery and Exhibition

*Featuring high-caliber work by young artists, as well as work by professionals at the Venice Arts Gallery; exhibitions of youth art at other galleries, ArtPartner sites, schools, parks and nontraditional, public venues*

#### Social Art Initiatives

*Documentary photography projects teaching young people to use a camera to explore and describe social justice and community issues, and to lift up their experiences and perspectives to the public through exhibitions, media, and other means*

## Do Children Need Art?

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**D***o children need art? This is the question we asked in 1998 in a cover story of our newsletter. In 2004, as we complete a year-long strategic planning process that charts our course for the next three years, this question continues to resonate—perhaps even more loudly than before. For not only are we faced with the challenge of advocating for the importance of the arts in a daunting economic climate, but we must also make our case when many are preoccupied with war, terrorism, and other global issues.*

*Do children whose lives are threatened with the terror of violence in their own neighborhoods, or who lack adequate food, clothing, or shelter need art supplies, cameras, and computers? Do they need artists to mentor them and show them how to translate the life of their imagination into a photograph, a film, or a poem?*

*To those concerned about the future of children in Los Angeles we at Venice Arts answer these questions based on our experience as artists, teachers, and mentors who recognize that creative expression is a fundamental human need that helps us to learn who we are as individuals and how we function as members of society.*

*We believe that engagement in the arts and exploring one's own creativity is a basic human right for every child. And, we believe that experiencing art can help us understand and empathize with the experience of others, which is critical in our increasingly diverse and often divided communities. In fact, art often provides the primary means for understanding others, whether people living in different times, in different lands, or in different neighborhoods.*

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*Since 1993, Venice Arts has given youth an opportunity to dive into the creative process. To celebrate their ideas. To experience the excitement and pride that comes with having their work exhibited. And, perhaps most importantly, to expose youth to artists who challenge, encourage, and inspire them.*

*Will all who participate at Venice Arts become artists? No. But all will have their unique voices heard and honored.*

*What about food, shelter, and jobs? We should not forget that art plays a critical role in academic and vocational development and contributes significantly to the health of the economy. In fact, the relationship between arts education and academic achievement is well documented through research that shows that the skills learned through participation in the arts—idea development, collaboration, patience—have application in many areas of life. And, in Southern California, the art and entertainment industries offer job options for the talented and ambitious that are rarely presented as options to low-income youth.*

*In a time of competing needs, when many are preoccupied with global and national issues, let alone neighborhood concerns, Venice Arts' programs represent a direct way to make a difference in the lives of low-income youth.*

*As we share our plans for the next three years, we hope you will answer the question, "Do children need art?" as we do: with a resounding YES!*

Marsha Rothpan  
Board President

Lynn Warshafsky  
Co-Founder

## Our Vision for the Future

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**I**n 1993, Venice Arts offered its first program: a black-and-white photography project titled *Venice Through Our Eyes*. It was modeled after a photography program started with homeless children in Washington, D.C., called *Shooting Back*.

Over ten years later, we have grown from one 8-week workshop with ten kids to offering an average of 45 ten-week workshops each year that reach over 500 youth. While we have provided successful programs in various art media, our core program remains documentary photography; teaching kids to explore their world—whether as close as the one square block around their house or as far as South Africa—and to share their images and ideas through exhibitions, presentations, and in the media.

In 2003, as we celebrated our 10th anniversary, it seemed a fitting time to launch a strategic planning process to clearly think about our future even as we celebrated our past. Through this process, we reaffirmed our mission: to bring talented artists together with low-income young people, whose access to the arts is limited, to nurture their creativity, imagination, and talent; and ratified three primary strategic directions:

- 1. To grow program depth, quality, and impact, as well as expand our capacity to retain long-term participants once they enter their teen years.*
- 2. To develop new and improved facilities to house our growing programs and staff, allow for the ongoing exhibition of art, and increase our visibility in, and access to, the public at large.*
- 3. To build internal capacities to increase our ability to support, develop, and sustain our programs over the long-term.*



## Planning Methodology

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Venice Arts chose an inclusive, interactive process for planning. Nearly 60 stakeholders—youth, parents, artists, funders, political leaders, arts and human service leaders, business community members, and collaborative partners—in addition to staff and board—were asked to share their knowledge, ideas, and dreams for Venice Arts. A Strategic Planning Committee led our process and made recommendations to Venice Arts' Board of Directors, who ratified this plan.

We analyzed our internal strengths and weaknesses to set a realistic context for discussing our future. Relevant external research was reviewed, including, among others, the Venice Family Clinic's 2002 Needs Assessment, offering pertinent information on the demographics and needs of local low-income families; the year 2000 U.S. Census; data from United Way reports; and the Southern California Grantmakers' *Arts in the Balance: A Survey of Corporate, Foundation and Government Arts Funding in Los Angeles County*. We discussed ethnic and economic demographic changes—particularly in Venice—and the possible implications for future program planning and direction. We also looked at the models and best practices used by other organizations with reputations for excellence.

To hear from as many as possible, we conducted interviews and focus groups, reaching Spanish-speaking parents, volunteer artist-mentors, and youth. We used a standard set of questions including how others perceive Venice Arts; what the most critical needs of low-income young

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people are and how Venice Arts meets or supports those needs; what the primary challenges and opportunities for youth art organizations are; and, what role, if any, Venice Arts should play in the broader arts and non-arts community.

We also asked additional questions to each unique group. For example, we asked our partners, funders, and community leaders about trends in the social and economic climate that might impact our work. We asked parents, children, and artist-mentors to tell us what they liked the best and least about our programs; to describe the most important things that have been gained from their participation; and to tell us how our programs differ from others. Their answers were thoughtful and illuminating.



## Discussion of Strategic Directions

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The following outlines broad goals developed to achieve each strategic direction and highlights the data that informed our decisions.

- 1. Grow program depth, quality, and impact, as well as expand our capacity to retain long-term participants once they enter their teens.*

Data strongly supports emphasizing program impact and depth over arts exposure and breadth. In fact, most respondents view Venice Arts' mentoring philosophy as unique and believe it should guide future growth. Kids noted that Venice Arts' programs are different from—and more fun than—other programs in which they have participated. Parents said that the most important thing Venice Arts did for their children was to help them see their world differently, and to believe in themselves and see that they have options in their lives.

Participants affirmed the unique niche Venice Arts has carved out in documentary photography and, increasingly, in digital arts. Respondents were almost equally divided about whether or not Venice Arts should integrate non-arts activities (homework tutoring, case management) into our programs, as is done in our newest program, ART+.

Staff and board discussions of internal capacity—particularly a small staff limited by physical space at existing facilities, affirmed the importance of bringing greater focus to our programs and building upon our strengths. To this end, we aim to:

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- a. Focus programs for 10-18 year olds on photography and media arts, deepening the learning experience for continuing students—particularly as they reach their teens—through advanced workshops, portfolio development, and internships.
- b. Focus programs for 6-9 year olds on multidisciplinary curricula (“art discovery”) including music, dance, writing, and visual art.
- c. Clearly articulate learning objectives and art proficiency standards in each program area.
- d. Add new creative staff to develop and oversee media arts and to help staff the new gallery and darkroom.

To remain successful, we have made some hard decisions: To work with fewer youth in order to expand the number of youth receiving in-depth learning and long-term mentoring. Eliminate long-standing ArtPartner collaborations that are difficult to fund; phase-out the very successful ART+ program by June 2005, primarily because of facility limitations; continue the Demonstration Visual Art Classroom program, but only develop funds for it after funds for core programs are secure.

2. *Develop new and improved facilities to house our growing programs and staff, allow for the ongoing exhibition of art, and increase our visibility in, and access to, the public at large.*

Nearly all participants in our planning process talked about the need for Venice Arts to expand and improve our facilities. Our primary location has been in a City-owned facility and respondents talked about the importance of our own home, a “more vibrant and creative space” to better and more comfortably accommodate our programs and staff.

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If we are to engage in a successful capital campaign, it is clear that we have to do significant organization building. Our internal challenges include a small staff and board. The most obvious external challenge is the exorbitant price of property in Venice. Some of the goals in direction #3, below, flow directly out of the desire to build our capacities so that, in 3 years, should our own facility be a priority, we will have created the foundation that will allow us to successfully pursue that goal.

We determined that expanding our programs "in neighborhoods," through our ArtPartner programs, while maintaining our base in Venice, is supported by demographic data. The year 2000 U.S. Census, for example, indicates continued high rates of poverty in Venice and Mar Vista, up to 20% overall and even higher in sub-neighborhoods such as Oakwood, although the economic demographics of Venice are rapidly changing with an influx of affluent households.

The recent, unplanned opportunity to acquire space on Lincoln Boulevard for the Venice Arts Gallery has relieved some of our space problems and has provided us with a more vibrant and creative space. It houses some of our staff, and provides a darkroom and classroom for our photography programs.

*3. Build internal capacities to increase our ability to support, develop, and sustain our programs over the long-term.*

To support this direction, we identified three primary goals: increase our visibility, develop our board, and build a more diversified funding base. Each is discussed, below.

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- a. Increase community visibility and awareness of Venice Arts' "brand."

Nearly everyone talked about the importance of increasing Venice Arts' visibility in the broader community and finding ways to better tell our story with the benefit of reaching more youth, volunteers, and funders.

The fortuitous acquisition of the Venice Arts Gallery in February 2004 has already resulted in increased visibility through signage and foot traffic. It has also introduced new people to Venice Arts through our exhibitions.

We believe that providing fewer and more focused programs, and better describing our art mentoring philosophy, will allow also Venice Arts to more easily "brand" our programs and develop our unique identity.

We intend to:

- a.1. Create and implement an annual plan, within the Development Committee in the short-term, for publicity and marketing; in the longer-term, to create a Marketing Committee of the Board of Directors.
- a.2. Commit resources annually to marketing materials and activities, including Internet marketing, web site maintenance and development.
- b. Develop our Board.

Venice Arts has a small, active board including people from the arts, the business community, and parents. During 2003, the hire of an Assistant Director allowed the Executive Director to focus more fully on board development. Bylaws and board job descriptions were revised; Board committees were established and a requirement for individual board

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participation on at least one committee was approved. Additionally, Board meetings were moved from monthly to every other month to make it easier for members to participate on committees and, nearly 100% of board members made a financial contribution to Venice Arts.

For long-term success, we will continue to build on the capacities of the board and to expand the partnership between staff and board. The broad goals established for Board building include:

- b.1. Increase the membership to 12-15 directors, all of whom “give or get,” while maintaining the community base on the board.
- b.2. Activate a Board Development Committee to create and implement an annual plan for board training and support, board member recruitment, and related activities.
- b.3. Develop board leadership through committees, and non-board leadership through engaging other volunteers, parents, and community members on committees.
- b.4. Re-institute the annual board retreat to include an annual review and analysis of goals and achievements, and the creation of an annual Board plan with concrete, clear goals for the Board.
- c. Build a more diversified funding base.

In its first 8 years, Venice Arts developed an excellent track record of researching and securing public and foundation grants. It has been less successful in private donor development; the small staff size has made cultivation activities required to build a base of annual donors difficult.

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In 2002, although faced with an increasingly challenging fundraising climate—for the nonprofit sector in general and arts organizations in particular—Venice Arts decided to dedicate staff and financial resources to donor development, reflecting a commitment to a new level of organizational maturity and sustainability. Supported, in part, by a grant from the Los Angeles County Arts Commission, a framework for individual and small business campaigns was developed and, in the fall of 2003, the Business Art Circle was successfully launched.

Over the next three years, Venice Arts hopes to build upon the early success of the Business Art Circle as follows:

- c.1. Integrate individual and business giving campaigns into Venice Arts annual development calendar, with realistic fundraising goals assigned to each activity.
- c.2. Ensure that there are adequate staff to support growing development activities.
- c.3. Identify other sources of self-generated, unrestricted revenues.

## Summary

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The past year has been exceptionally challenging and equally exciting. We took a number of calculated risks requiring a strong belief in our future: We drew on our cash reserve to invest in new staff; leased a space to house a Gallery; and made the difficult decision to eliminate some programs, while committing additional resources to strengthen and expand others. We can already see that these risks were worth taking and that we are moving into the future that we imagined during our planning process.

We have held two exhibits of youth art in our Gallery—now booked through June of 2005—with up to 300 people attending each opening and a daily stream of visitors. We have initiated a darkroom program and hope to hire new creative staff to develop and expand our digital media programs. We have also begun a new, exciting *Social Art Initiative* with Russian refugee children, supported by the California Council for the Humanities and the City of West Hollywood.

We have nearly re-paid the funds borrowed from our cash reserve and are poised to launch our second annual Business Art Circle and individual donor campaigns. We have secured new funds from several large foundations and a handful of smaller family foundations; the latter having found us through the Internet—underscoring the importance of dedicating resources to our web presence. And, we have initiated research on a number of ideas for generating unrestricted revenue.

We believe that we have set a course for ourselves that we can achieve, one that will strengthen our ability to touch the lives of the young people with whom we work by helping them to see and experience the creativity and potential that lives in each of them.



## Acknowledgments

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Table of Contents: *AIDS Orphans*, Durban, South Africa, Selena Vargas, Age 16; *Quinciniñera*, Los Angeles, Donna Alejandre, Age 15; *Cowboy*, Mar Vista Gardens, Carmen Torres, Age 13; *Untitled*, Mar Vista Gardens, Mayra Barba, Age 17; *Friends*, Mar Vista Gardens, Richard Rodriguez, Age 12; *Venice Pier*, Venice, Donna Alejandre, Age 17.