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## Uneasy Partners: Arts and Philip Morris

By MERVYN ROTHSTEIN

The Philip Morris Companies, the largest packaged-goods concern in the world, is facing a serious problem: How can it keep all the goodwill its highly praised support for the arts has created from going up in smoke?

This year, Philip Morris contributed about \$15 million to arts organizations across the United States, making it one of the largest corporate givers to the arts in the country. Over the last 30 years, the company has handed out millions of dollars to the arts, with an emphasis on innovative work that many corporations would not go near. It is the largest corporate sponsor of dance in this country; indeed, without Philip Morris the whole landscape of dance in the United States would be substantially different, and enormously diminished.

But Philip Morris, which is also the world's largest cigarette company, has also been a major backer of Senator Jesse Helms, Republican of North Carolina, which is a major tobacco-producing state. It has contributed to his election campaigns and awarded a five-year, \$200,000 grant to the Jesse Helms Citizenship Center in Monroe, N.C.

Senator Helms has been a leader in the attack against the National Endowment for the Arts, assailing it for supporting works of art he considers obscene, especially works by artists who he feels are promoting a homosexual life style. Many people have questioned whether a company that is a patron of the arts should also back a politician they view as a homophobic censor and potential destroyer of the arts.

Rejection and Boycott

Their doubts have led to increasing demands that arts groups reject Philip Morris's money, as well as to boycotts of two of the company's prime products, Marlboro cigarettes and Miller beer, organized by Act-Up, the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, and supported by gay-rights organizations across the country.

"It's a clear case of corporate America playing both ends against the middle," said William Waybourn, the director of public affairs for the Dallas Gay Alliance, which is active in the boycott. "What happens in some cases is that you get burned, and in this case Philip Morris got burned."

That Philip Morris plays both sides of the street is clear. It even gives money to arts groups that present performers whose work Senator Helms and other conservative politicians have found objectionable. What is more difficult to discern is whether its diverging policies arise out of self-protection or genuine commitment. The company itself seeks strongly to separate the issues, with the clear implication that the support for the arts is based on commitment and the backing for Senator Helms on self-protection.

"We hope that people would look to what we do in the arts as a measure of how we feel about the arts,"

said Stephanie T. French, the company's vice president for corporate contributions and cultural affairs. "What we do for Helms is something else." The Importance of Helms

"Senator Helms has been very supportive of our business interests," said George L. Knox, Philip Morris's vice president for public affairs. "He is a senator from a state in which we have a large number of facilities and many employees, with factories producing products for each of the industries in which we compete. It would be ill advised for a company like ours, which lives in a political arena, to turn our backs on him."

In addition, Mr. Knox noted, when you compare the amount of money given to the Senator with the millions given to the arts, there is no comparison. "The political action committee of Philip Morris employees has given Senator Helms, since its creation in 1978, some \$19,000, or \$1,500 a year over 12 years," he said, adding that Philip Morris has contributed money to many other politicians, both conservative and liberal, and that the Helms center does not support the Senator's political efforts.

Mr. Knox and Ms. French are quick to point out that their support of Senator Helms has not prevented them from giving money to groups like the Franklin Furnace, an experimental arts center in TriBeCa that is committed to presenting controversial work, or giving money to the Kitchen and Artists Space, both of which have been involved in disputes over art content.

"In fact," Mr. Knox said, "we've taken a lot of heat from the conservative right, the religious right in particular, on the basis of some grants of ours which may not have been made directly to the performer but which have been used for performances and works which are totally anathema to their interests." Supporting the Endowment

Their grants, they say -- and the recipients agree -- are given with no strings attached, with no restrictions of any kind on content. And at this year's Senate hearings on the future of the endowment, a Philip Morris spokeswoman, Karen Brosius, the company's manager of cultural affairs, gave a powerful speech calling for the endowment's continued life.

But despite the company's attempt to separate support for the arts from support for Senator Helms, they remain linked in many minds. Mr. Waybourn of the Dallas Gay Alliance said that arts groups should also boycott Philip Morris. "Why should the arts groups participate in something when the corporate sponsor is giving money to destroy what they are doing?" he asked.

The actor Ron Silver, the president of the Creative Coalition, an organization of arts professionals, also urged arts groups to sever their relationship with Philip Morris.

"People in the arts community say, 'Please don't go after Philip Morris, because we get a lot of money from them,' " Mr. Silver said, adding that he was speaking for himself and not for his organization. "But I feel there are enormous contradictions bordering on hypocrisy in accepting money from an organization that helps keep people like Jesse Helms afloat." Backing Out of Bessies

The dispute made headlines recently over the Bessie Awards ceremony in New York, an annual event that honors experimental performers, choreographers, designers and composers and of which Philip Morris has been a major sponsor. Citing Philip Morris's role, Karen Finley, a performance artist who was recently denied a grant from the National Endowment, resigned as co-host. The actress Danitra Vance, the other co-host, later resigned for the same reason.

But despite the controversy, leaders of major arts organizations that receive funds from Philip Morris

said that they had nothing but praise for the company's arts program and saw no problem in accepting its money. Harvey Lichtenstein, the president of the Brooklyn Academy of Music, whose Next Wave Festival has received major grants, put it this way: "I don't like the fact that Philip Morris supports Helms, but they have a perfect right to do so for their own business reasons, and I don't think there's a conflict between the two things."

And Charles V. Raymond, the interim executive director of the Joffrey Ballet, another major recipient, said he believed that "nothing Philip Morris did as far as supporting the Joffrey would ever lead me to believe that there was any requirement that the troupe support Jesse Helms or anybody else." *The Trouble With Cigarettes*

Controversy is nothing new to the Philip Morris arts program. One of the company's principal products is cigarettes, with many brands that include Marlboro, Benson & Hedges, Merit and Virginia Slims. Many people believe that cigarettes kill and for many years have said that accepting money from a company that sells them is morally wrong. Philip Morris has always rejected such criticism, noting that cigarettes are a legal product.

Philip Morris began supporting the arts in 1958, when it was a relatively small cigarette company and long before there was major controversy over cigarettes or the Senator. George Weissman, the chairman of Lincoln Center and former chairman of Philip Morris, recalled that the program was created to build "a positive image for the company and its employees by giving something back to the community that helped us become successful." But, he added, there was also something else: the focus on the experimental, on those artists who dare to take risks.

"I think that idea started back in 1965, when we did our first art exhibition, 'Pop and Op,' " Mr. Weissman said. "We wanted to demonstrate to our own employees that we were an open-minded company seeking creativity in all aspects of our business. And we were determined to do this by sponsoring things that made a difference, that were really dangerous." *Backing the Avant-Garde*

Many companies pride themselves on innovation and fresh thinking but are nonetheless highly suspicious of it in the arts. Philip Morris's commitment to the avant-garde and to the unusual, though, continues to this day, under the current chairman, Hamish Maxwell, as the company has grown to become the largest food company in the United States. Its Kraft General Foods division products include Jell-O, Tang, Kool-Aid, Maxwell House and Sanka. Its Miller Brewing Company is the second largest brewer in the world, with brands that include Miller, Miller Lite, Lowenbrau and Meister Brau.

The commitment seems a real one, not just one of convenience. The company is the major financial benefactor of the Next Wave Festival, to which it gave \$350,000 this year. Its huge support of dance companies, large and small, includes \$750,000 for a two-year sponsorship of American Ballet Theater, \$250,000 to \$300,000 a year for several years to the Joffrey Ballet, and major donations to the Alvin Ailey dance company and Dance Theater of Harlem. It also supports theater companies, art museums and touring art exhibitions.

Even the company's headquarters in Manhattan strongly reflects the commitment to the new. Office walls are decorated with paintings, sculptures or other artworks. Every piece is distinctly modern, and almost every one is distinctly avant-garde. *Museum Branch in the Lobby*

The building's lobby is home to the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris, a space donated to the museum in 1983 as one of the many grants the company has given the Whitney.

Philip Morris is of course very concerned about letting the public know about its contributions, so it can build that positive image. As a condition of many grants, the company's name appears in advertisements, programs, brochures and other literature put out by the arts organizations.

In exchange, though, Philip Morris often provides much more than money. "It follows up with publicity, advertising and entertaining," said Jane Hermann, the executive director of American Ballet Theater. "And in every city we play, they always buy 400 or 500 tickets.

Such support is especially appreciated by arts groups in these days of decreasing corporate contributions and in the atmosphere of uncertainty that exists over government backing. Mr. Knox says that Philip Morris will neither increase nor decrease its support because of the situation. "In terms of our giving, the only economy we are concerned about is the one in our building," he said. (Philip Morris's third-quarter profit this year was up 25 percent from the comparable 1989 period.)

He and Ms. French, though, admit to a continuing frustration. "This using of Philip Morris as a symbol for people's discontent is so simplistic and so unconstructive," Ms. French said. "People turn complicated issues into things that can fit on a bumper sticker. It's all they want to deal with, and it's very unfortunate."

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