

A Giant Artistic Gibe at Jesse Helms

By ROBERTA SMITH

One of the sculptures to be seen this weekend has as its target Senator Jesse Helms, whose opposition to Federal financing of artworks he considers obscene has earned him notoriety on the SoHo art scene. The sculpture is "Helmsboro Country," an object in the shape of a monumental flip-top box of cigarettes, which is on view at the John Weber Gallery, 142 Greene Street, through tomorrow.

The work also takes aim at the Philip Morris Companies, a New York-based corporation that is a prominent supporter of the arts and that employs in subsidiary companies 3,900 people in Mr. Helms's home state of North Carolina.

"Helmsboro Country" is the work of Hans Haacke, a German-born artist who has lived in this country since 1965 and who is well known here as a perpetrator of what might be called investigative political art. The flip-top box and five-and-a-half-foot-long cigarettes, which seem to have casu-

ally spilled from its open lid, hold center stage at Mr. Haacke's exhibition.

At first glance, "Helmsboro Country" exudes the product-oriented cheer of Pop Art. The graphics silk-screened onto both the cigarette box and its contents all look distinctly Marlboro-like and familiar, but the messages they deliver are not.

The boldly lettered "Helmsboro" appears on the package where the cigarette's brand name should be and a portrait of Mr. Helms has replaced the "P.M. Inc." medallion. Each cigarette is ringed by the words "Philip Morris Funds Jesse Helms" and has affixed to it a copy of the Bill of Rights, a reference to a recent Philip Morris advertising campaign that offered to send a copy of the document to anyone who requested one.

In the enlarged fine print along the sides of the cigarette box — areas usually reserved for the Surgeon General's warning about cigarettes and cancer — there is a statement from Mr. Helms taken from the Congressional Record of Sept. 28, 1989.

Referring to a statement made in 1981 by a representative of Philip Morris, Frank Saunders, concerning the impact of the National Endowment for the Arts's "stamp of approval" on corporate decisions about cultural financing, Mr. Helms concluded: "That means that artists can get corporate money if they can get respectability — even if it's undeserved — from the National Endowment for the Arts. And that is what this is all about. It is an issue of soaking the taxpayer to fund the homosexual pornography of Robert Mapplethorpe, who died of AIDS while spending the last years of his life promoting homosexuality."

In addition to these words, the box has a 1980 quotation from George Weissman, the former chairman of Philip Morris: "Let's be clear about one thing. Our fundamental interest in the arts is self-interest. There are immediate and pragmatic benefits to be derived as business entities."

Mr. Weissman, who is now chairman of Lincoln Center, said in a recent telephone interview: "I don't know if I exactly said that. However, I have said that it is in the self-interest of businesses to support the arts because it makes for a better community in which they operate. The arts improve the quality of life for everybody."

In a telephone interview the other day, Mr. Haacke, who is 53 years old and lives in New York City, said: "I have a particular interest in corporations that give themselves a cultural aura and are in other areas suspect. Philip Morris presents itself in New York as the lover of culture while it turns out that if you look behind the scenes, it is also a prime funder of Jesse Helms, someone who is very hostile to the arts. He is also someone who is probably the most homophobic Senator we have at the moment."

The artist said he hoped the juxtaposition of information in "Helmsboro Country" would embarrass Mr. Helms in his home state and Philip Morris in New York, where the company has supported such recent exhibitions as "Picasso and Braque: Pioneering Cubism" at the Museum of Modern Art, "The Latin-American Spirit: Art and Artists in the United States, 1920-1970" at the Brooklyn Museum and "Treasures from the Fitzwilliam Museum" at the National Academy of Design. Philip Morris has also been a major sponsor of the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Next Wave festival.

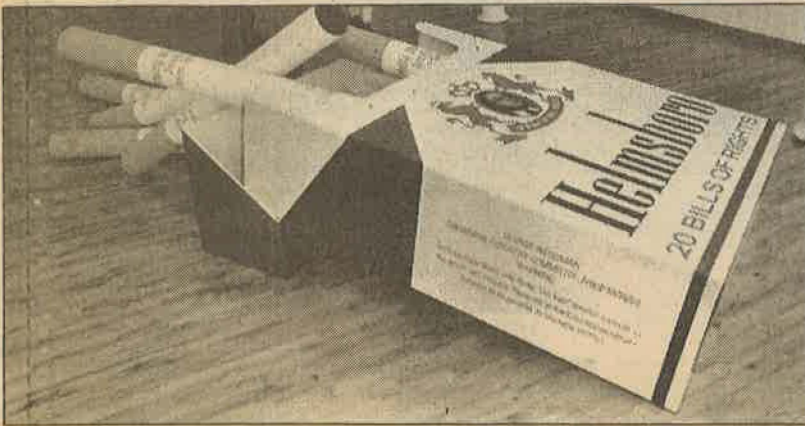
Mr. Haacke said that in the course of research for his work, he had turned to the Philip Morris Companies' "Corporate Contributions 1988 Year-end Comparative Summary."

There, he said, he found a listing for a \$20,000 contribution from the company to the Jesse Helms Citizenship Center in Wingate, N.C., which he had never heard of. He telephoned the News and Observer of Raleigh for further information, prompting the newspaper to start its own investigation. The result was a News and Observer article on April 11, which reported that Philip Morris's contribution to the Helms Center had been \$200,000, not \$20,000, and that the center was also being supported by a number of local businesses.

As for Philip Morris's support of Mr. Helms, Mr. Weissman said: "We also support the Bill of Rights, which gives everyone the right to speak even though we don't always agree with what they say. I don't think the two are connected."

Mr. Helms's office did not return phone calls regarding Mr. Haacke's sculpture.

The director of corporate communications at Philip Morris, Alice McGillion, said in a telephone interview yesterday: "We work with Jesse Helms on some things that are clearly related to our business side. He doesn't represent our viewpoint on other issues."



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"Helmsboro Country," by Hans Haacke, at John Weber Gallery.