

End of an Era in Arts Funding

Philip Morris — a diverse corporation now known as Altria — is one of the big tobacco companies and the maker of Marlboro cigarettes. For some 40 years, it has also generously supported the arts in New York, support that is now coming to an end. Altria is decentralizing its operations and moving its headquarters out of New York, and it has spun off its international tobacco division so that it can create new smokers elsewhere.

We've always hated the basic product that Philip Morris sells, which has harmed millions of smokers and nonsmokers at immense cost. We've also admired its diverse and relatively unfearful support of the arts. There is no disputing its generosity, even though we shuddered at how easily large amounts of cash can buy neutrality and, eventually, respectability in a very influential part of the community.

The New York art world now has a very large hole

to fill in its budget, a hole it is used to filling with a single check from a single donor. This will create serious problems unless other corporations — less ethically compromised, we hope — make up the difference. There is never a shortage of funding opportunities in the arts, of course. But it would be a wise corporation that saw the chance now to step in and take the place of a company whose support for the arts has become a byword.

The loss of Altria gives the art world a chance to shake its addiction to what has, in fact, always been tobacco money. Yes, that money was spent in the public interest, supporting institutions and programs and exhibitions that have greatly enriched us all culturally. But it's also worth wondering about the real costs of that funding — the fact that for so many institutions Philip Morris ceased to mean tobacco and came to mean mainly a reliable check.