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Helms's 'Indecent' Sampler

Senator Sends Photos To Sway Conferees

By Kara Swisher
Washington Post Staff Writer

To garner support for his amendment to prevent federal funding of art some find offensive, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) has sent a sampling of four photographs he calls indecent to conference committee members who'll decide the issue.

A letter urging the senators and representatives to keep his amendment in the final legislation accompanies copies of the photographs by the late Robert Mapplethorpe, including one of a small girl partially exposing herself to the camera and one of a man in a polyester suit with the zipper open and genitals exposed.

"I was pretty shocked when I

See HELMS, B2, Col. 3

Helms's Letter

HELMS, From B1

opened the letter and saw them," said one aide to a Republican congressman on the Appropriations subcommittee on the interior. "They certainly got my attention."

The letters and pictures were sent marked "personal and confidential," and "for member's eyes only," a Helms spokesman said yesterday.

The letter calls on the conference committee members to see what all the controversy is about. "I suggest you take a look at the enclosed materials," it reads. "It's your call as to whether the taxpayer's money should be used to fund this sort of thing."

Since Congress is in recess until after Labor Day, it is unknown which of the 15 senators and 11 representatives on the committee have seen the selection of photographs from Helms, but spokesmen in a half dozen offices confirmed yesterday that they had received the mailing. The committee is scheduled to take up the \$170 million NEA budget the first week in September.

The NEA has been severely criticized during the last two months for its arts funding policies, particularly regarding the work of photographers Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. Mapplethorpe's pictures have many homoerotic and sadomasochistic images, and Serrano's controversial photograph shows a crucifix submerged in urine.

The House reprimanded the agency last month by cutting \$45,000 from its proposed budget, the exact amount of two grants that funded Mapplethorpe and Serrano. The Senate added a five-year ban on the two arts groups that sponsored the grants, and also passed the Helms amendment, a sweeping ban of federal funding of material that is "obscene or indecent" or "denigrates, debases, or reviles" beliefs or people on the basis of religion, race, creed, sex, handicap, age or national origin.

The other two pictures Helms sent

committee members were of a naked boy and of a penis resting on a pedestal. They were selected from a catalogue from a Mapplethorpe exhibit at the Washington Project for the Arts, which picked up the show after officials at the Corcoran Gallery of Art canceled it earlier this summer to avoid political controversy.

"They are not the four worst photos—on a scale of 1 to 10 on what's in the show, these are about a 5," said a Helms spokesman.

Before this mailing, Helms's office has only sent out pictures when requested, the spokesman said, though Helms did hand Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) a catalogue on the Senate floor. The office has also made photographs available to the public, "so taxpayers could see for themselves what the discussion is about, rather than have to rely on media reports."

Helms's office has not yet received any response from congressional offices on the pictures. But at this weekend's meeting of the National Council on the Arts, 26 presidentially appointed artists and arts supporters, who advise the NEA, word spread quickly about the mailing, and many said they were shocked about the tactic.

Not shocked, it seems, is the Office of the Postmaster on Capitol Hill.

"We will deliver anything and we never censor mail or open it," Joanna O'Rourke, executive assistant to the postmaster, said when asked about policies on obscene materials.

"When certain skin magazines were sent here, a lot of members did not want them, but courts ruled that we deliver it anyway," she said. "They said the members are here to represent the people—all the people, I guess."