

Aldon James Expelled from National Arts Club and Apartments

February 16, 2012 | By Amy Zimmer



Aldon James speaks before a performance by artist Terence Koh at The National Arts Club on November 19, 2009. Credit: (Andy Kropa/Getty Images)

MANHATTAN - The National Arts Club board voted Thursday night to expel its embattled former president O. Aldon James from the membership of the 113-year-old institution - meaning he will have to relinquish his apartments at 15 Gramercy Park South since only members are allowed to live in the landmark building.

The board also voted to expel James' twin brother, John, and their friend Steven Leitner.

In a statement issued after the vote, the board said the three men "committed conduct that is seriously prejudicial to the Club and which violated the rules and policies of the Club."

The statement continued: "Such an action means that none of the three may enter the Club's common spaces; have any other rights or privileges of membership in the Club; or serve on the Board of Governors or any Committee of the Club unless and until they are restored to membership in the Club by a vote of two thirds of the Board of Governors."

As first reported by DNAinfo, the James brothers and Leitner used club apartments to hoard flea market junk and antiques - believed to have been purchased with the organization's money. The trio are currently under investigation by the state Attorney General's office and the Manhattan District Attorney's office, and the club's board decided to hold an eviction hearing for the three.

The club's internal hearing, originally scheduled for September, had been delayed when James filed a lawsuit. When it finally took place last

month, neither James nor his lawyer, Adam Gilbert, attended or called any witnesses to make their case.

The James brothers and Leitner control six of the club's roughly 40 apartments, according to the club. At one time, they had an estimated 20 apartments.

For their prime real estate - with a key to the exclusive Gramercy Park - Aldon James paid \$1,143 a month in rent, his brother paid \$356 a month and Leitner paid \$858 a month, according to recent tax filings first reported on by DNAinfo.

Of the apartments the men still control, four of them have leases.

When those leases are up "in a couple of months," they will have to leave, the club's lawyer Roland Riopelle said.

The two other apartments are the subject of a housing court battle. Under a court settlement, those apartments were supposed to have been vacated on Wednesday, but James filed an order this week claiming that the club was mistreating him, forcing his bags to be checked and hindering his ability to clear out the apartments.

"I think that will continue to be a battle in housing court," Riopelle said, adding that the three might challenge the fate of the other apartments in housing court as well.

The board deliberated for several hours on whether it should take disciplinary actions based on the club's by-laws, noted Riopelle, who was not present at the closed-door meeting only for board members.

The club claimed in a countersuit filed last month that the James brothers and Leitner failed "to pay appropriate rent for the multiple spaces they occupied at the Club will be established at trial, but is believed to exceed \$1,500,000." And that's just for the past five years.

Gilbert had said he didn't think James would get a fair shake in the trial, and when he learned of the board's decision said, "What else would one expect from a board that is as jaundiced and biased as this board."

He did not immediately know what his client's next steps would be.

James served as the famed club's president for 25-years.

"We support the board's actions and believe that the James Group received more considerations and fairness in the process than they ever showed for the club's members," the Concerned Artists and Members of the National Arts Club, a group that has called for greater transparency at the institution, said in a statement.

"Now the club can get back to what it is meant to do, and the long hard work of rebuilding can begin."