

Aldon James May Soon be Moving Out of the National Arts Club

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

GRAMERCY - The National Arts Club may soon be losing one of its longtime and most well-known residents: former president O. Aldon James.

James' twin brother, John James, and their friend Steven Leitner may also leave the venerable arts institution's historic mansion at 15 Gramercy Park South. The trio rented their apartments at below market rate and used several others to stash junk before Aldon James was ousted as club president following a series of reports by DNAinfo that exposed the hoarding and other problems.

The club had filed charges in July to begin the process to evict the threesome, according to sources. The three are expected to have a hearing at the end of August in front of a committee chosen by the board, which will then make the final decision about a week later.

Club insiders, however, said the men appeared to be leaving on their own volition. The three have been spotted sporadically at the club, but haven't slept there for weeks, sources said.

The club confirmed it was moving to claim "certain apartments."

"As part of our ongoing efforts to secure and protect NAC assets, we have taken appropriate steps to obtain possession of certain apartments that are, in the opinion of our counsel, being used in an unauthorized fashion," Dianne Bernhard, who was voted in a president in June, said in a statement.

"We are moving as quickly as due process allows and we will continue to do so until all assets are benefiting the club, its members and public."

When pressed further for details about the expulsion of the trio, a club spokeswoman said, "We are not going to comment any further on ongoing litigation."

The James twins and Leitner, a lawyer, had been stockpiling several of the roughly 40 apartments in the building, filling them with junk, antiques, clothes, photographs and art they purchased on weekend flea market trips, as DNAinfo reported in January.

The three paid rents well below market rate for duplexes with a key to Gramercy Park: Aldon James paid \$1,143 a month for his apartment, Leitner paid \$858 and John James paid \$356 a month, tax filings showed.

According to an internal investigation conducted by the club that was obtained by DNAinfo in June, the three still had a stash of seven apartments that became hoarding havens.

Many club members have asked why Aldon James - whose tenure officially ended in June as the club is being investigated by the Manhattan District Attorney and state Attorney General - was still living in the building.

The club's internal investigation accused James of using the National Arts Club as his personal piggy-bank during his 25-year reign as president, spending "thousands and thousands" on personal expenses and offering cheap apartments to family and club members to get them to turn a blind eye to his actions. It also alleged that at least one resident was asked to pay \$200,000 in key money for an apartment and that whenever elderly residents passed away, James would take control of their apartments while paying no rent.

There were "thousands and thousands of dollars" worth of items James bought at flea markets, pet stores and antique vendors - using handwritten club checks - that employees told internal investigators were stored in the trio's apartments while the

expenses were allegedly hidden in the club's "Flowers and Decorations" account under James' direction and the accountant's "acquiescence," according to the investigation.

Now, whenever James leaves the club, staffers at the front desk are authorized to check his bags, club insiders said.

James' lawyer did not respond to calls for comment. John James abruptly hung up the phone when reached and someone answering Leitner's Broadway law office said the attorney was "gone," before hanging up.

Under Bernhard's leadership, the club, which has been closed over the summer, is getting a massive cleaning, a fresh coat of paint and new upholstery and carpeting. The club is also restructuring its management by hiring a general manager. It didn't have one before, which many believed helped allow James to run the board with unchecked power.

Bernhard, who had been James' first vice-president, also has an apartment in the club - though she paid more than other board members with apartments. The philanthropist and painter, who also lives in Connecticut, shelled out \$7,600 a month for her duplex, according to tax filings.