

Eternal Return: O. Aldon James Jr. at the National Arts Club

By Dan Duray
April 17, 2012



O. Aldon James Jr. (Courtesy Patrick McMullan)

Last Wednesday afternoon, as most of the country waited to hear the charges that would be handed down for George Zimmerman, a certain group of Gramercy Park habitués was awaiting developments from an altogether different kind of court case. The current administration of the National Arts Club, that storied mansion of mothballs and culture worship, was trying to make it so that their former president couldn't hang out there anymore.

"Do you understand the implications of this for every club or every 501(c)3 in America?" said board member Cherry Provost. "It sets a precedent, because any other disgruntled person who was kicked out of, maybe, The Harvard Club could say, 'Well look what happened at the National Arts Club.'"

To say nothing of the Yale, Players, Core, Knickerbocker, University, Metropolitan, Lotus, Colony, Union or Athletic clubs! Or any of the city's other fine institutions that, despite their disparate stated causes for unification, are usually just cliques for old people. For the past few weeks, the NAC had been failing as a clique, since it hadn't been able fulfill a clique's primary duty: exclusion. Last year Mr. James was booted from the presidency after 25 years at its helm over accusations that he mishandled club finances and cut sweetheart rent deals for his brother and a friend at the club's tony plant on East 20th Street. He is also accused of a few other social faux pas, among them telling the new president that he hoped she'd get cancer, but none of this was a problem until late last month, when a Manhattan Supreme Court judge overturned Mr. James's eviction, meaning that he was free to mingle with all the people who'd testified against him at his eviction hearings.

After his court win, Mr. James, in his signature pink glasses, became a daily presence at the club, giving tours to new members and talking loudly on a cell phone in the lounge, which is, of course, forbidden. "It's been like a peacock, doing its feathers," said one member, who requested anonymity because she was named in the eviction lawsuit. His main phone tactic involves naming enemies as he spots them ("You'll never believe who just walked in. Tuppy

Gossip! No, I'm staring right at him!"), none of it explicitly threatening or even that brash, but these are WASPs we're dealing with, and they tend to take the "I know that you know that I know that I'm not supposed to be here" act seriously.

For the staff, he goads. Roland Riopelle, the lawyer for the club, compared the whole situation to the 1944 movie *Gaslight*, in which Charles Boyer tries to convince Ingrid Bergman that she's going insane by dimming the lights and pretending that he doesn't notice the darkness.

"Their treatment of the employees at the club is frequently designed to irritate them or confuse them," he said, speaking of Mr. James and his brother. "The employees of the club are constantly doing their best to maintain an even temperament in the face of this deeply irritating conduct."

A victim of one such encounter was Miguel Serrano, a doorman who has worked at the club for 12 years. The feud between Mr. James and the doorman was longstanding—he'd fired him, and Mr. Serrano retaliated by leaking photos of the cluttered interior offices of the club, a sure sign of mismanagement, to the Gramercy Park reporter for DNAInfo, the website that puts the hyper in "hyperlocal." A slide show ensued. One recent night, Mr. James dressed down Mr. Serrano, since rehired by the new administration, in front of a gang of new members, going so far as to call Mr. Serrano a "fraud."

"I went right up to him and I said, 'I'm not a fraud,'" Mr. Serrano said. "The only fraud here is you." Mr. James then went straight to the police to say that he'd been harassed. (It makes sense that Mr. James has a sibling since the main tactic he's employed is a version of that thing where you run a finger one inch over someone's arm and insist "I'm not touching you.")

There are reports of Mr. James, in his period of reinstatement, following his enemies down to one of the neighborhood's many bars and Danny Meyer restaurants, so that he can blather at them. He is accused of quoting Newt Gingrich, and making abstruse comments like "The Turks are going to win it this time!" He reportedly followed the club photographer, who had testified against him in the eviction hearings, to a meeting she had at another club and told her, as she took photos there, that her photos were terrible and that she was fired. The source who relayed this story was unsure as to whether or not he actually had the authority to fire her (probably not), but was clear on the fact that the photographer was broken up about it. If you want to go out on a further reportorial limb, he is also said to have rounded up a group of Hasidim in vans and had them park outside the front of the club to block traffic, though it's hard to find anyone who remembers seeing this first-hand and, well, it's not the kind of thing you'd forget.

Then there was the matter of the chocolate cigars. Last week at an event celebrating hats in general ("We invited several of the best milliners in town," said one attendee), Mr. James was caught on the club's security cameras making idle conversation with the man behind the front desk and then placing a sheet of paper over a box of chocolate cigars that had been laid out for attendees. When the man turned his back, Mr. James made off with the candy.

It's unclear when exactly Mr. James started exhibiting the strange behavior that prompted his booting because apparently he has always been the sort of person who would apologize for wearing a wool hat to a formal event and explain that his raven had attacked him earlier. Blame the word Arts in the club's name, maybe, since these kinds of institutions always allow for eccentrics, and weirdo acceptability must increase exponentially at a club that celebrates Art. (Adam Gilbert, a lawyer for Mr. James, was unavailable to comment on his client's recent activities and declined to arrange an interview with Mr. James, explaining, "We've been keeping him away from the press for ... well, a variety of reasons.")

The decision on Wednesday to reboot Mr. James from the club was successful, by the way. An appellate court stayed the decision that overturned the ruling of the eviction hearings, which were presided over by a board-selected committee following Mr. James's impeachment, also decided by committee—it's been drawn out. Reached for comment Thursday morning, one member seemed hesitant to celebrate.

"It's a relief but you can never be too confident, you know?" she said. "It goes back and forth so frequently."

If there's anything truly menacing about Mr. James's recent behavior, it's been his efforts to regain power at the club. Right now the club has a proxy circulating by mail, a boilerplate letter that members sign and send back that endorses new board members. Mr. James and his allies have sent around a second proxy on similar stationary that, if signed, supersedes any other proxies and proposes changing the club constitution in ways that would facilitate his return to the board. Petitioning members currently need 500 signatures to be considered; the new proxy would lower that number to 50, and also make the club membership list public to facilitate mailing. If the current measures seem designed to prevent power from changing hands at the institution it's because Mr. James himself enacted the measures that now complicate his coup.

There's also another measure that seems aimed at settling scores—if the changes to the constitution are enacted, board members would no longer be able to live at the club, which means three of Mr. James's enemies would be evicted. None of this is very likely, since an amendment to the constitution would require approval by two-thirds of the membership, but at this club stranger things have happened.