

O. Aldon James Files Lawsuit Against 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 - O. Aldon James, the former president of the National Arts Club, along with his twin brother, John, and their family friend, Steven Leitner, is suing the NAC and its board of governors.

A lawsuit filed in Supreme Court Monday attempts to ward off the NAC's attempts to expel them from the club and its apartments, which the three have occupied for decades.

The complaint "seeks injunctive relief to stop a mean-spirited, vindictive and wrongful campaign by the National Arts Club and its directors from expelling three longtime members of the NAC and longtime tenants of NAC-owned apartments," the 45-page complaint document stated.

The suit was filed in advance of a meeting of the NAC board of governors scheduled to take place this week. The hearing is expected to allow members of the

board to testify either for or against the three men involved in the case and ultimately determine their fate within the organization.

But included in the documents filed with the court is a temporary restraining order, signed by a judge, prohibiting that meeting from taking place until the defendants can show cause for their eviction actions before the court.

"Absent judicial intervention, the NAC will trample on the property and liberty interests of Plaintiffs and wrongfully expel them as NAC members and evict them as tenants," the complaint document stated.

Over the past several months, the James brothers and Leitner have been the subjects of extensive investigations within the National Arts Club. The club's finances are also being probed by the Manhattan district attorney's office and the state attorney general.

An NAC internal report obtained by DNAinfo alleges that James committed a variety of offenses during his tenure as president of the club, a position he vacated in June. The report suggested that he wrote club checks for personal expenses totaling thousands of dollars, that he stole cash from the club's bar and events receipt box and that he took items from residents' apartments without permission.

"Thousands and thousands of dollars worth of items were purchased by [James] at local flea markets, pet stores and antique vendors using handwritten checks," the report said. "We determined that many handwritten checks were written by [James] for what appear to be personal items."

Attempts made by DNAinfo over several weeks to contact James and his lawyer have not been successful.

James is also accused of taking over vacated apartments and using them to hoard personal items.

For his residence inside the NAC's historic mansion at 15 Gramercy Park South, James is paying well below market rate, and he is charged with offering deep discounts on units for his family and friends.

John James paid \$356 per month, according to tax filings, which listed James' apartment as costing him \$1,143 a month and Leitner's rent at \$858.

In the lawsuit, the attorney representing the three men called the allegations against them "irrelevant, embarrassing and scurrilous," according to the complaint document.

"The Statement of Charges is nothing more than a thinly veiled effort by Defendants to recover Plaintiffs' apartments in the fastest manner possible so that Defendants may reap financial gains and clout by renting those apartments out to friends and supporters at higher rents," the document stated.

In a previous statement to DNAinfo, current NAC President Dianne Bernhard confirmed that the club was looking to reclaim "certain apartments" in the building.

"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," Bernhard said.

"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."

Statement from National Arts Club President Dianne Bernhard:

"The litigation between the NAC and the James Group is complex. It is not as simple as "evicting" them from their apartments, nor is that our intention at this point in time. Our action in Housing Court was brought to secure units that are being used in an unauthorized manner, and for which no lease was ever signed by the Club or the James Group. In addition, we are now obligated to respond to the charges that have been brought by the James Group against the Club, Board and individual Board members in New York State Court. We hoped that we could have made this process less painful and less costly for the NAC than it has been, but we have not been able to reach a resolution without litigation. Unfortunately, the James Group seems committed to pursuing litigation, even if that results in the Club diverting substantial resources to the funding of the related fees and expenses."