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## Amid Finery and, Some Say, Vermin, Elite Arts Club and Its Ex-President Battle

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It is a tale of boldface names and precious Manhattan real estate, of institutional loyalty and tenant tomfoolery.

It is a tale of vermin and fine art, set inside an august brownstone on Gramercy Park South.

The National Arts Club filed papers in State Supreme Court in Manhattan this week outlining its case for a planned countersuit against O. Aldon James Jr., the club's eccentric former president. The move came months after a group led by Mr. James sought an injunction against the board to stop what the group called "a mean-spirited, vindictive and wrongful campaign" to expel three club veterans: Mr. James, his twin brother, John T. James, and a friend, Steven Leitner.

Justice Carol R. Edmead has also allowed the board to proceed with an internal hearing to discuss Aldon James's removal, amid allegations by the board that he misused club money, covertly occupied apartments of the club's recently deceased tenants, and commingled the detritus of his hoarding habit with the site's fine art and antiques, "attracting vermin and creating potential fire hazards." The James brothers and Mr. Leitner deny any wrongdoing. The internal hearing is set for Jan. 23.

The three men, according to the board, had for years concealed their control of several apartments inside the club's Studio Building. The board estimated a loss of more than \$1.5 million in potential real estate transactions and \$500,000 in damages caused by "willful neglect and waste." Aldon James, the group said, also took ownership of club property, including watercolors by Auguste Rodin and Louis Comfort Tiffany.

In 2003, John James pleaded guilty to misusing the club's tax-exempt status to buy expensive jewelry, which he resold at a profit, without paying sales taxes. He received five years' probation and agreed to pay \$469,213 in restitution and \$60,000 in fines, according to the Manhattan district attorney's office.

The result of the January internal hearing for the three men could include censure or expulsion, said Roland G. Riopelle, a lawyer for the board. Expulsion would also mean eviction, as only club members are allowed to live in club apartments.

"If they want World War III," said Adam B. Gilbert, Aldon James's lawyer, "they can have it."

The protracted battle has created fissures inside the brownstone's hallowed walls. Some board members remain loyal to Mr. James, who helped raise the group's profile over the 25 years that he led the club; his tenure ended in March.

At a meeting in September, according to court documents filed by the board, Mr. James's frequent disruptions derailed the board's attempt to address club business. When a security officer was summoned, the former president said he would have to be "carried out" of the club and threatened to press assault charges if anyone touched him, according to Mr. Riopelle, who attended the meeting.

During the gathering, Mr. Riopelle said, Mr. James told the new president, Dianne Bernhard, a cancer survivor, that he hoped the disease would return. Mr. James also turned to Mr. Riopelle, according to the lawyer, to say that any of one female board member's three dead husbands would "thrash" Mr. Riopelle if they were still alive.

At one point, Mr. Riopelle said, the club's secretary burst into tears "because the meeting had become so chaotic she was unable to follow the proceedings and take accurate notes."

Throughout his tenure, Mr. James, who wore rose-colored glasses with his bowties, cast himself as an unconventional leader: a fixture of New York City's cultural scene — rubbing elbows with Kennedys and Vanderbilts — but an occasional populist in a famously highfalutin neighborhood. Last year, to protest the locked iron gates at Gramercy Park, Mr. James scaled the park fence with a ladder, even though, as a resident on its block, he had a key.

In March, the board said Mr. James would be taking a "well-earned vacation" from his presidential duties.