One Frieze Artist’s Special Relationship With His Retainers

The Story of a Thing

As told to EMILY SPIVACK MAY 4, 2016

In this series for T, the writer and author of “Worn Stories,” Emily Spivack, interviews creative types about their most prized possessions.

For the artist David Horvitz’s much anticipated commissioned work at this year’s Frieze New York, a professional pickpocket will work in reverse, secretly depositing mini sculptures into fairgoers’ pockets and bags. Here, Horvitz reflects on the art of giving things away, as art — and perhaps his oldest personal object: his orthodontics.

I’ve been wearing retainers since I got my braces off in high school. I try to wear them every night. I have two: The bottom one is original but the top one broke and was replaced with a mouth guard that protects me from grinding my teeth. They’re kind of like gloves — gloves for the mouth.

I like the idea of having a daily practice or I guess you could say a nightly practice. Every night, I brush my teeth and put in the retainers. I’ve tried to meditate every day but when I travel it gets disrupted. I used to wake up and read a chapter of a book, but when I travel, it gets disrupted. Basically travel disrupts everything except for wearing the retainers. I’ve gone through...
I’ve never thought about it before, but my bottom retainer might be the oldest thing I have. I hold onto very few things. I try to get rid of as much as I can. I’ll be in my studio and I’ll find a bunch of, say, Polaroids — something I don’t want because they take up too much space or I don’t want to carry them around with me — and I’ve developed this ongoing practice where I’ll mail them to art libraries under the guise of a donation of an artwork or document or ephemera. For example, I’ll send a letter that says, “Here are these 10 Polaroids from a road trip to Robert Smithson’s ‘Spiral Jetty’ from 2002. I would like to donate them to your collection at the Kandinsky Library at the Pompidou in Paris. Please accept my donation.” I sign them, but I never include my return address so they can’t send them back. Sometimes they’ll find me and say, “We need to mail this back,” and I give them a fake address. Mostly, though, I think the librarians are kooky and they’re like, “This guy is thinking about our library and he’s funny. Let’s archive this dead tree he mailed to us.”

My teeth were very crooked when I was younger. Years later, my orthodontist told me that he had given presentations about my teeth at orthodontic conferences because they’d been that bad but he’d successfully fixed them without surgery. I still wear these retainers almost 20 years later because my parents spent so much money on my teeth, and if I stop wearing the retainers, my teeth could get bad again. It’d be such a waste to regress.

Usually people don’t know I wear retainers. I don’t like to talk while I’m wearing them because I sound weird. But just say you call me in the morning. I’ll answer my phone, “Hello? Oh, hold on. I have to take off my retainers,” and that’s how people usually find I’m wearing them. When I’m traveling and stay at people’s houses, I don’t feel secretive because I’ve worn them for so many years, but I always mention when I put in my retainers at night because inevitably they’ll say, “What’s in your mouth? Why are you talking weird?”

It’s funny — you wear shoes for six months but they get worn out and you get new ones. But these retainers — I brush them, I gargle with Scope while I’m wearing them, my dentist cleans them. I don’t have any jewelry but in a way, they have become a kind of jewelry.