

THE ART OF FA-Q

by John Ittner for Prison Life Magazine, November 1996

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He's like a deer. When you're not hunting, they're everywhere. Pick up a rifle, they vanish. I'm on his trail and he's on the run. FA-Q got out of Rikers Island in May. Now he's homeless and hard to find. During the day he roams the book stores and art galleries stealing expensive books, which he sells for one fourth of the cover price to street vendors in SoHo or around St. Mark's Place. This is his job; he's a professional shoplifter. If he doesn't make enough for at least 3 bags of heroin, he could get sick. He's busy stealing, selling, scoring and using.

When he sits still, he draws. His drawings are his diary. They track his life, prove he exists. It is the thing he does extremely well and the only thing other than dope that he must do. He never quits. Where drawing is concerned he is like an Olympic athlete, always in training. In prison or out of it he does three or four a day. When he is drawing he forgets where he is. This is very useful in prison. His Rikers survival kit is a ball-point pen and a torn envelope.

I have been looking for him for a month. I'm not having much luck, but I see signs of him, the way a hunter might notice a patch of flattened grass where a deer has lain. Sometimes he sleeps in the Rivington School Sculpture Garden on East Sixth Street. On the dirt floor is a foam mattress and some covers he found on the streets. Though he is an original member of the Rivington School, he is not officially allowed there. No one gave him the key to get in the front gate. The way he is now, no one in their right mind would give him the key to anything. Late at night, after shooting his last bag, he climbs the fence and curls up on the dirt floor of the sculpture shop. The welcome he gets there is as thin as he is. His presence is tolerated by Ray Kelly, the cowboy artist who runs the place. It's like the Robert Frost poem, Death of the Hired Man. "Home is the place that when you have to go there, they have to take you in."

His drug addiction makes him a criminal. It has stolen his life, which he buys back day by day through making art. FA-Q is his artist name and the attitude he puts on like a clown suit. He draws clowns often—insane, haunted, suicidal, leering faces—chronicles of a life in hell. Sometimes I think they are self-portraits. That makes them even scarier. His thoughts take him places where I do not want to go. His world is frighteningly authentic. The bullshit was burned out of him years ago. His real name is Kevin Wendell. He's from Cleveland, Ohio and 41 years old.

Cowboy Kelly lets FA-Q stay at the sculpture garden, but gets angry if he brings other junkies around. They will give the garden a bad name. FA-Q is bad enough. Ray Kelly and Kevin Wendell go back a long way. Ray likes Kevin and respects his art. It's hard not to like him. Kevin is funny and down to earth and they used to be great friends and Kelly sticks by a friend. That's the way they do things in Amarillo, where he came from. Nevertheless, the sculpture garden is set up so that FA-Q can't do much harm. Anything of value is either under lock and key or, like the arc welder, too heavy to lift over the ten-foot fence. Since FA-Q's been around, though, my bicycle has disappeared. FA-Q swears he didn't steal it and I want to believe him, but it's best that everything is nailed down. Don't know if he took it or a friend of

his took it. Either way, I blame myself more than I do him. I should have locked it up. He's an incorrigible thief and an addict. If it's lying around and he needs a fix, it's his. He's stolen from his best friends, people who were trying to help him. Once he even stole a police radio out of a fire house. It takes \$5 a day just to stay even with his heroin habit and eat. In the past eight years he's been arrested twenty-eight times, mostly for shoplifting.

When I met him in 1987, he'd never been to prison. Then he was a rising star in the art world, getting as much as \$2,500 for a painting he could do in a day. He worked fast and the stockbrokers who bought his work made him money even faster than that. The art market was booming in the 80s and looked like a good bet to become famous. He had drive, taken and ambition. He was a star, a rough genius in the art hotbed that centered around the Lower East Side of New York City. He hung out with the Rivington School, a group of metal sculptors, blacksmiths, painters, performance artists, rockers, poets, video artists and hangers-on who came together to work and play at a sculpture garden on a formerly vacant lot at the corner of Rivington Street and Forsyth. FA-Q stood out in that remarkable group. He worked constantly and courted chaos like a demon. His motto was "Make Shit Happen – FA-Q" and he meant it. He wrote it on the walls all over town with a thick black marker he carried like a gun in the back pocket of his heads. A lot of shit happened since then. And he has seen a lot of shit happen.

Back then he was married to a tall, dreamy, red-haired German girl named Monica who followed him to New York from Berlin, where they met. She was an artist too and called herself Miss Understood. She married Kevin for the green card. I remember seeing them together at a Rivington School event in October 1987. An Austrian band called Fishmae was playing. FA-Q and Miss Understood—poetic, isn't it—were dancing. She was wearing a tall chartreuse velvet hat that looked like a caterpillar and made her look about seven feet tall. She wasn't wearing a bra and her tits were flopping around inside a flimsy blouse. He had his face between them with a three-day-old beard and they were banging him in the ears.

After Miss Understood, he married Manon, a French-Canadian girl who played bass in an all-girl scum rock band called Blood Sister. They played places like CBGB. She was tough looking with short black hair bleached white like Andy Warhol, except it wasn't a wig and the roots showed. Blood Sister was a pretty good band if you liked noise. They were living in a sublet storefront on Avenue B, doing a lot of drugs.

The story is a sad one. Manon became pregnant, and they had a daughter named Angel Louise. A few months later, they woke one morning and Angel Louise was gone- a middle of the night crib death. FA-Q lost it. Since then he's been on the road to hell. When you add up his time in Rikers it comes to 2 years.

FA-Q supported the family by selling his work and shoplifting. Manon made a little with the band. But the puppy, Robo, was a problem. You never knew when he was going to bite someone. Kevin called him "a dog with an attitude." Robo bit a 2-year-old Puerto Rican girl who tried to pet him. The child lived in the neighborhood and her parents were furious. Robo was declared an official menace to society and banned from the sculpture garden. It turned into a big controversy, argued about for days, with Manon insisting that it was alright for Robo to bite people because he was only following his nature, which every living being had a right to do.

Ray Kelly said that may be true but that he should follow his nature somewhere else. Robo had to go.

Kevin walked Robo out to the middle of the Williamsburg Bridge, picked him up and threw him over the rail. He watched Robo sail downward. The dog made a small splash when viewed from that height, but Kevin watched in amazement as Robo swam ashore to Brooklyn. We pitied the poor people of Brooklyn when we heard the story, but laughed our asses off: Robo Dog, too mean to die.

I lost touch with FA-Q. Whatever news I got was from Kelly. All I knew was that he was in and out of prison and doing a lot of drugs. The city tore down the garden to build low-income housing. Kelly got a good lawyer who pushed the city for a new lot for another Rivington School. Kelly won but it took years and the old gang drifted away. There wasn't a place to get together again until Kelly got the lease for a lot on East Sixth Street and started all over with Tovey Halleck, a blacksmith. The two put the Rivington School back together again.

"If I build it, they will come," Kelly said. He was right. I came back. Freddy the Dreamer came back. New fans appeared. The place is a magnet - that iron, I guess. It's a place to make and be inside a work of art. But more that draws people to the Rivington School: it's freedom, a crazy chemistry of art, friendship, laughter, madness and work. It's a place where people who don't belong anywhere else feel completely at home. You can always meet somebody crazier than you are there's someone like FA-Q.

I found the Rivington School when it was already established and thriving. I had leased a storefront on Rivington Street to live in and use as a studio. Across the street was an art gallery. This was at the height of the East Village art scene and high rent had pushed galleries down beneath Houston Street. If the East Village was the cutting edge of outsider art, Rivington was the sharp point of that edge.

One day I noticed a wrecked motorcycle on the sidewalk in front of the abandoned building next to my storefront. It didn't have any wheels and was painted day-glow orange and pink. I was wondering what this piece of junk was and noticed that directly across the street there was a gallery being filled by a crew of determined maniacs. I went over to see what was going on, and met a Japanese fellow who was sweeping up. His name was Mako. I was thinking about complaining about the day-glow junk next door to my place, but held my tongue when I stepped into the long narrow gallery. There was art all over the walls, covering the floor-art more interesting than any I'd seen in a long time.

A show was being hung with a controlled anarchy oddly directed by a fellow in a straw cowboy hat, smoking a Marlboro. The guy reminded me of an iguana, but handsome. He appeared in charge, yet not in charge. I could see immediately that no one could be in charge of this crew. Then he stood a .22 calibre bullet upright on the floor and dropped a forged steel penis-looking thing on it. The cartridge went off with a loud bang. God knows where the bullet went, but he looked like he knew what he was doing and the rest of them seemed to take the whole thing in stride like, "he just dropped a 20-pound piece of steel on a bullet in a room full of people, big deal." I was intrigued. It was the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Mako introduced me to the cowboy and to my surprise, he was friendly.

"Welcome to the Rivington School" Ray Kelly said. Somebody came over and asked if I wanted to contribute to a beer run. I gave him a dollar and a few minutes later I had a tall boy. Kelly opened his and poured a sip out on the floor, "For the spirits of the dead," he said.

Some kind of Texas thing, or Puerto Rican — I liked it. When the beers were gone but for one, a tall, curly-haired guy shouted out, "Hey, fuck you, you didn't pay for a beer. That's my beer. I paid for it." FA-Q yelled back, "Fuck you too, Higgins." Higgins did not take it lying down. There was a beer at stake, not to mention honour if you want to call it that. Higgins tried to grab the 16-oz. Bud out of FA-Q's hands and it went all over the floor, foaming up. "Goddamn it, fuck you," he shouted and went for FA-Q's neck. But FA-Q was quick. Higgins chased him down and pretty soon had him on the gallery floor. They rolled around and the can got squished and the beer spilled out. FA-Q pulled out his marker and drew on Higgins' forehead while they wrestled. Higgins had his own marker and the battle turned into a contest over who could turn the other guy into a drawing and not get beaten up. They were pretty well matched, and before long they were both too tired to continue. By the time it ended, they had put lines all over each other. Higgins retired and got himself a beer, the place calmed down. That was the first of many beer-fuelled fights between those two painters.

Despite all the commotion, when the show finally did get hung, it looked great. The opening a few days later attracted a big crowd that spilled out onto the sidewalk. It was a good scene. There was an auction afterwards to benefit the school, and I bought several pieces at prices that ranged from \$10 to \$50. Some of them were by FA-Q. Others were by Ray Kelly, Ed Higgins, Linus Carragio, Robert Harker, Toyo, Rolando Vager, Jeff Perren, Tovey Halleck, David Gizmo, Winny, Monty Cantsin. I walked away from that auction with a terrific collection. Over the next 3 years, I became a regular collector of FA-Q's work. I never knew when he would knock on the door of my Rivington Street storefront with a handful of drawings to show and sell, never more than \$10 bucks each. That was all he needed to buy a bag. His habit wasn't so expensive then.

This was the highest point of FA-Q's success. He had been to Japan twice with the Rivington School, making huge paintings that were part of installation art shows sponsored by department stores. The shoppers watched him paint giant paintings, so big he had to use rollers. He even dipped his hands into the buckets. FA-Q was a hit and the Japanese were paying the tab.

He was on a roll until 1990. Then the baby died. His addiction spiraled. He went to Rikers. Manon left him. The sculpture garden was razed.

One day I was drinking beer with Kelly at the new place where he handed me a clear plastic bag full of drawings that FA-Q had done while he was in Rikers. It wasn't a very large package, but it was packed with little pieces of paper covered with FA-Q's nervous signature style. Nearly all the drawings were figure dominated by large heads. Because I knew they'd be done in prison, the drawings seemed to have an extra edge. FA-Q's forced confinement seemed to intensify the images. Strange how the people who seemed to love freedom most often lose theirs.

In prison FA-Q's only freedom is art. The drawings were done on little pages from a spiral notebook, torn pieces of envelopes, the backs of signs ripped off from the wall of Rikers bathrooms, whatever was close at hand. I took them out the bag and put them in my

lap. I had not seen FA-Q for six years. Now I was seeing him again. I peered into his dark, yet somehow radiant soul. These scraps of paper seemed eerily alive and suffering in my hands, stripped of ambition and pretense. I had to look at them all, intensely, individually, each a world apart. Kelly waited until I was finished before saying, "Kevin gave these to me and asked me to see what I could do with them. What do you think?"

"They should be a book," I said, "FA-Q's Rikers Drawings. They're amazing. He's even more intense than he used to be."

"Why don't you see if you can find someone to publish them?"

"I don't know anybody, but I'll try."

FA-Q had no home or telephone, no fixed address. He lives like a wild animal. I had to track him down. I knew he slept sometimes in the sculpture garden, but he was never there when I was. I wrote my number with a note to call me on the wall of the shop near where he had been sleeping. I left word with Kelly that Prison Life wanted to put him in the magazine. Most artists get excited if a magazine wants to do a story on them, but FA-Q never called. I started going to the garden in the morning. He was never there but he left tantalising signs in his wake.

One day I find a lurid, frenzied drawing of frantic heads, all within one large demented head, surrounded by indecipherable writings, obviously a FA-Q. It's lying on the trod-down path to the shop where it has been both rained on and walked on. Part of the Rivington School style is to not make a big deal out of art, even though art is the heart of the matter. The colored pencils melted into the paper like watercolors, a dirty boot print finishes it. The boot print is too well placed to be an accident. I met Cowboy at work. He would do something like that, finish a drawing then step on it. Cowboy the collaborator. He's like FA-Q in that he works all the time and in strange ways. The rain must have given the drawing a patina of age. The boot print says something about the fragility of art, a message in a bottle. FA-Q was here. I wanted to take it, but I left it there in the dirt, subject to the elements, cast to the wind like Kevin. Next time I go there it will vanish.

I begin to feel some pressure to find him.

The magazine needs photos and I need to talk. So much has happened. The gaps need filling in. Finally, I resort to the hunter's oldest trick, bait. I tell Kelly to tell him I have \$50 bucks for him. Money is the best bet when you're fishing for a junkie. I write it on the wall next to my telephone number. FA-Q \$50, call John. The next night at 10pm, I get a call at work.

"John, it's FA-Q. Hey, can I have \$20 bucks? I can come get it. Where is your office?"

"Don't come here," I say. I don't want to have to explain to him and it's almost time for me to leave. "I'll meet you at night at the Sidewalk Cafe. Do you know where that is? I have \$50. The place is a popular biker's hangout half a block from the Rivington School. He obviously needs to score. He will definitely be

there. I borrowed a camera from the photo department and stopped at home for my tape recorder. I don't know when I'll see him again.

I get to the Sidewalk ten minutes early, look inside. He's not there. I take a table outside and wait. I have mixed feelings about seeing Kevin. I don't want to see what he has lost, the hardened junkie that he has become. I'm waiting, when a gaunt figure in a hunting jacket and black cap suddenly walks out the bar. It's him. He doesn't see me.

"Kevin," I shout. I don't want to scream out, "Hey, FA-Q" in this crowded place. He turns and comes over, smiles. His missing teeth give him the air of a Jack O'Lantern. Other than that he looks better than I expected.

"Kelly's downstairs," he says. I follow him down the steps. It's noisy and crowded. Ray Kelly is there playing pool with a guy named Tom. I've got to get FA-Q out of there. It's too noisy to talk.

"Let's go to the sculpture garden," I say. We leave Ray and Tom there. On the corner I stop in the bodega and buy a six-pack of Budweiser. He asks if he can get a grape drink. He doesn't drink anymore. That's funny because I just got my hands on old pictures of him and there is a Bud in every one. I can't quite believe I've found him at last. Actually, he found me. The hunter is hunted. I unlock the gate and we go into the yard. The street lights make it easy to see. The rustic metal is silhouetted in the glow.

Time has slowed down, moving backwards to a happier time. It feels good to be with Kevin again. Everything is new yet familiar. He's essentially unchanged in spirit; he's been out for 2 months now.

I ask him what they busted him for.

"They charged me with robbery. They say I pushed a guard. I was only shoplifting. But I didn't really push the guard. What it was, the guard tried to grab me and I pulled away from him. He hit his hand on a door frame and cut his hand. When the police got there they said 'Oh, your hand is bleeding. I hope you're alright, did he push you?' The guard said 'Uh yeah, sorta.'" That's it. The New York, New Jersey cops they're really strict. So I was hoping for a DAT to be released right away, right."

A Desk Appearance Ticket would have meant he could walk until his court date.

"I never show up for those," FA-Q says, "and it ends up turning into a warrant."

Did he get convicted each time he was arrested?

"No," he says. "No, most of the time there'd be like 3 or 4 arrests. Then I'd go through Central Booking or get taken downtown. I'd get a DAT and wouldn't show up for court. It takes 30 to 90 days to come out. During that 4 months I might be arrested 3 times. By the third arrest there's a warrant out for the first one. So when they find the warrant they can't give me a Desk Appearance Ticket. I have to go through the system. So I go through the system and everything pops out. They find all the - you know — so even

while I'm locked up for 60 days, a warrant would pop up while I'm in jail and I'd have to go back to court again from jail."

I ask how many times he's been arrested.

"I have something like 28 arrests, " he says, "Eight years, 28 arrests, something like that. The first 22 years I lived in New York I had no arrests."

When I first met him, in '87 he'd never been arrested. I ask what he thinks of this new sculpture garden.

"Great," he says. "Doesn't seem so disorganised. The old one was sort of haphazard. Not as many rats either, right. Not as many Spics hanging out - not supposed to say that. Niggers, Spics, where all - it doesn't matter. Like the old black man told me one time, 'Yo just a nigger like everybody else.' It made me feel comfortable."

He draws every day when he's inside, on whatever he can get.

"Like backs of flyers"" he says, "Even the rule book is the first place I start drawing on cause they have a couple of pages for notes. The prison rule book. They take your photo when you get there and you hold the book up so that you can't deny ever being a rule book.

Let's say they make a mistake and don't give you the rule book to hold up for the photograph and you get a ticket for fighting or something. You can say you didn't know the rule."

On the inside, he usually lived in a dormitory.

"It's like a huge room," he says, "Almost like a shelter or something with 58 beds. The next bed is like 3 feet away. You got a locker, your bed, one right next to you. It's just a big room filled with beds, no privacy. You go to take a shit, the CO's can look out the window and see you, you know."

"The first time I went into Rikers, uh, the first time, like the first hour was the worst, the mental thing about being trapped like an animal. That drove me nuts. I felt like punching walls or breaking out, whatever. Now I go to sleep right away. That's what I try to do the whole time and go through the process. Central Booking you're handcuffed all the time. Your hands are handcuffed in front of you, fuck up and you're handcuffed behind. So I usually just try to sleep."

"You don't seem to be that changed to me"" I say, "But you've been through a lot of shit since I've seen you last time."

"Everybody changes, but they can lock up your body, but not your mind. That's the thing that keeps me going. When I'm drawing or reading I'm not even there. That's what I... I try to live in my own world. The difficult part is the privacy, not having any privacy. The first thing I enjoy is being in a room alone, or taking a shit alone. That drives you nuts after a while, being around people all the time and most of the people you're locked up with are not the people you want to be with. Especially in the beginning. About eight years ago I'd be the only white guy in the house. I guess the only thing - it helped me learn how to fight better."

"Did you have to get in many fights?"

"Years ago more than now. Now no. You get a reputation too. You get in one fight and everybody talks. They're a bunch of old ladies. They all talk. Don't fuck with this guy- you can't push him around. That's the thing. Once you step back once or pussy out, they test you. People test you. Once you're willing to fight, then they back down — usually."

"Do you get any special status for being an artist? Do people look at you with any more respect?"

"Some people do because they want portraits done of their girlfriends, or envelopes designed which I don't do. You know, like when they send a letter to their girlfriend they like to have some customised drawing. They're impressed actually. Toyo sent me some photographs of the Rivington School in Japan when I was there. They were impressed with that, definitely. They hear you talk. Everybody talks, but they all lie. You hear people in there talk about how they wear clothes from Saks Fifth Avenue, or whatever. Then you see them on the street and they're bums, you know? You see the clothes they go home in- the same as the ones they came in. They're all fucking disgusting. People talk a lot better about themselves than they are. So they don't believe a lot of the things I talk about like being in Japan and all that stuff. But the photographs I show 'em and they say 'What are you doing here?' Drugs is the reason I'm here. My daughter died of crib death and I started doing drugs. No excuse but that's what happened."

"Do you ever hear from Manon?"

"Yeah, she calls the Emerging Collector but I don't really get along with the owner. So I get messages from other people. Manon robbed me too, you know. She kept all my paintings and never paid me, told me that the show in Paris was cancelled when it wasn't. She auctions and sells my pictures off and keeps the money."

FA-Q's paintings could fetch \$2,500 back in 1988. I ask him if he watches much TV in prison.

"No," he says. "Well, there's a day room with a TV, but nobody will shut up. You know what I mean. There's always some asshole gonna tell you the end of the movie. It's ridiculous. I never go there. I had a bed that was close to the day room. There are windows so I can watch the TV from my bed. I saw one movie. It was a good movie, 'The Professional'. It's about a professional hitman and he hooks up with this 14-year old girl. That was a good one but otherwise? Maybe watch the news once in a while, sports is a big thing, you know? There's a lot of arguments about the TV too. The guys who knock the TV down. You know, people who are going to destroy- people in jail will like kill each other the TV, telephones, like that. That's the big thing, the telephone. Some guys want to be on the phone all the time. This last time, when I did eight months, I made one phone call to home and that's it. Even on the street I don't use it. I don't have a family. I don't get along with my mother that well either. I never had no help financially, or any other way. Only criticism and that's about it."

"Is your mother still in Cleveland?"

"She moved to California with my stepfather. I've never been to California. I call my mother when I get married. I've been married 3 times. I have a baby or something like that."

"Since Manon?"

"No. I'm still married to her, legally I guess, but not practically. She can't even come to this country. She has to get a wedding license or something. They told her if she tries to come across the border again she'd be banned for life. She has no proof that she's married to me, her fault. But I don't know. She wasn't faithful to me anyway. I got locked up for 30 days. First time I got locked up I was with her getting money for both of us. She cheated on me while I was locked up."

"Do you always do the same thing, stealing art books?"

"Sometimes I get CDs. But I've even gone into a fire station and stolen a police radio. Whatever pops up you know. But mostly books, laserdiscs, something like that. I sell them right away, but I look at them on the way, riding the train. I look at them a lot of times in the store. Sometimes you have to go through every page to find the alarm."

Where does he go?

"There's a lot of bookstores in New York," he says. "Also galleries — any place that has books, you know, a lot of galleries have books, a library on the wall, nice to look at but nobody ever touches them. I just dust them off. They're brand new but they got a lot of dust on top. Nobody ever uses them. I redistribute books. In Germany there were 2 major stores. I used to steal from one and sell them to the other. Like about a month later I would take the same book back to the store I got it from. And go back and forth, same book but in New York I usually sell them to the guys who sell them on the street, around St. Marks SoHo. Originally, it was all Koreans doing that, selling books. Now it's a lot of Africans doing it."

I comment that his new drawings seem even stranger than the ones he did before prison.

"The drawings that I do in jail," he says, "I wasn't on any drugs. It's an escape. A lot of crazy shit happens in there, you know? Like petty shit. Stupid shit, somebody stealing somebody's underwear. It's ridiculous. Who's cleaning, who's dirty, who's wiping their ass clean. There's a lot of gossip. Everybody watches everybody. Some people can get away with anything because they're afraid of them and other people nobody's afraid if they come down on them. They're bullies. A lot of assholes. There's gangs that control some of that."

"Are you a part of any gang?"

"Nah" he says, "I don't want to be a part of any boy's club. I wasn't a boy scout so why should I be one now? Sometimes you have to be a one man army to survive which I think is right. Another gang might agree with you though."

"What about sex?" I say. "Do people prey on others?"

"There's a little bit of that but not alot. Alot of people agree to have to sex with others. There's a lot of homosexuals who dress in drag or have breasts, hormone injections or implants. So there's — I think Spanish people are a little looser about having sex with another man. They find it easier to do it. There's some homosexuals who look like a woman, you would think it was a woman. And whenever they come into your house... at one point we had 3 of them like that. It got pretty wild. They'd be in the bathroom... Yeah, you know they hit 'em off for cigarettes, things like that. Some guys go in and out so much it's like their life to be in jail. Those guys that are nothing on the street, but in there. This guy that was across from me — he was like Macy's. He had all the jewellery, watches, comic book collections, a lot of valuable stuff in jail. Cigarettes are like money. Like you take one pack and pay two back. Things like that. They make money doing that. Gangs do that kind of thing too. This one gang had like all their profits on the floor, showing off. Security came in and confiscated it all."

"So what do you think this time? Are you going to be out for a while?"

FA-Q assumes that as long as he's doing drugs, he's going to be in and out of jail.

"But it gets longer in between," he says. "It takes longer for me to get caught. I learn where not to go, what not to do, like I don't end up as desperate, and also my habit is smaller. I don't do as many drugs as I did."

His habit is mostly heroin and cocaine.