
Entertainment

2,000 Glowing Pigeons Illuminate the Brooklyn Waterfront

As artist Duke Riley proves in 'Fly by Night,' LED-equipped pigeons are the new performance art.

By Kara Weisenstein

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PHOTO BY TOD SEELIE FOR CREATIVE TIME.

Seeing 2,000 pigeons equipped with LED lights whirl through the night sky is a little bit like laying flat on a merry-go-round at dusk and watching the starry sky twirl overhead. It's strangely enchanting to feel the wind from beating wings. After gathering with a couple hundred strangers to behold this twilight marvel on the New York waterfront, venturing into the Brooklyn night feels a little more magical.

The mastermind behind this spectacle is artist and avian aficionado Duke Riley, and his piece, commissioned by Creative Time, is called *Fly By Night*. Every weekend night for six weeks, a massive flock of carrier pigeons is released over the Brooklyn Navy Yard at sunset. As the light fades, tiny LEDs attached to the birds' legs twinkle to life, illuminating the darkening sky.

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Creative Time, a nonprofit that produces art in public spaces, is known for ambitious, politically-charged commissions. *Fly By Night* was partly inspired by the US Navy's historical use of homing pigeons to deliver messages at sea before the widespread use of radio. The Brooklyn Navy Yard was the site of the military's largest coop at its peak during World War II. Returning birds to this site is not only a love letter to pigeon fancying, it is something of a PR campaign for creatures routinely called "rats with wings." Riley tells The Creators Project, "They're extremely smart, and have excellent facial recognition skills. In some ways, they're kind of like a liaison between the human and the natural world."



PHOTO BY TOD SEELIE FOR CREATIVE TIME.

Riley's affinity for the birds runs deep. As a child, he found and cared for a pigeon, and though his mother sent it away, the bird came back. Riley later lived in a pigeon coop in Providence, Rhode Island for several years. "There's a real bond between Duke and the pigeons that he homes and raises," says Creative Time's executive director Katie Hollander. "It's one of the things

that brought him to New York, because there's such a large, though dwindling, pigeon community. It's been an integral part of his practice." In 2013, Riley trained birds to smuggle Cuban cigars from Havana to Key West in a performance piece titled *For Trading With The Enemy*. A daring and mutable artist, he also draws on the urban waterfront as a wellspring of inspiration. In *After the Battle of Brooklyn* (2007) he built and launched a Revolutionary War-era submarine called the *Turtle* in the New York Harbor and got within yards of the *Queen Mary 2* before being arrested.



PHOTO BY ERIK HERRSTRÖM

"The urban waterfront is the genesis of every city. All cities are based around the development of water, whether for consumption or transportation. It always marks the oldest place in the city," says Riley. "The waterfront is the buffer between the governed and the ungovernable."

Today, the home of the *Fly By Night* flock is inside another sort of battleship. A decommissioned vessel named the *Baylander* houses 13 specially designed coops. “We’d never worked with animals before. It’s something we were very sensitive about, and we wanted to make sure we had processes in place to care for the health and well being of the birds,” Hollander says. Creative Time employs a team of avian experts to care for the pigeons, and the [project FAQ](#) addresses the history of homing pigeons and the care and makeup of Riley’s flock.



PHOTO BY ERIK HERRSTRÖM

Fly By Night encourages urbanites to look up and take in their surroundings. “There’s a level of enjoyment and childlike amusement,” Hollander says. “One day, we were down at the Navy Yard, and a security guard ran over and said, ‘I just got off a 16-hour shift, and seeing this filled me with joy.’ That’s what we’re going for: an opportunity to replenish people with hope and wonder.” Riley and his avian performance artists illuminate the waterfront in a

confluence of art and nature, creating a spellbinding experience for those lucky enough to witness it this spring.

General admission tickets for *Fly By Night* are fully reserved, but for a chance to see a performance, you can join the waitlist. To learn more about the artist [click here](#).

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Entertainment

Taking Flight with LED Pigeons | Animal Art

Pigeons flying in the sky at night becomes a grand performance.

By **The Creators Project**

May 12 2016, 1:30pm



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In Animal Art, the animal kingdom gets featured in fantastical and artistic ways.

At twilight in the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Duke Riley releases thousands of birds with LED lights strapped to their legs, illuminating the sky in a choreographed flight pattern as a piece of art titled *Fly By Night*. The Creators Project got a chance to meet with Riley in his converted aircraft carrier-turned-bird coop in the days before this first performance, getting exclusive behind-the-scenes access to his process. We see first hand the complex training of pigeons, the inspiration behind this performance art piece, and Duke's history in creating art about and with marginalized communities, including the pigeon fanciers of New York. The avian performance is presented by Creative Time, a New York-based nonprofit that produces art in public spaces. Here, we see one man's reverence for nature as a reminder that we can find magic in unexpected places.

To learn more about how the birds are cared for, [click here](#).

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