

Review: In ‘Fly by Night,’ Pigeons Light Up the Brooklyn Navy Yard

By Roberta Smith

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From my experience, it seemed likely that “Fly by Night” — a performance by 2,000 pigeons conducted by the multitalented artist and bird maven Duke Riley in the Brooklyn Navy Yard — would be more fun to read about than to observe. This fate has befallen other public artworks in New York that relied on nature’s cooperation.

In 2003, after much buildup, Cai Guo-Qiang’s fireworks over Central Park fizzled because of unusually thick mist. In 2008, Olafur Eliasson’s “Waterfalls” — constructed and plumbed at three points on the edge of the East River — were dwarfed simply by the scale of that waterway, although this failure might have been foreseen. Similarly, it was hard to imagine that the pigeons Mr. Riley had collected and taught to fly in darkness would make much of a dent in the New York skyline, even if the birds took off and the LED light affixed to their ankles (one per bird, controlled remotely) stayed on.

But on Thursday evening, the pigeons taught everyone on hand quite a bit about their intelligence, their ability to collaborate with earthbound beings and their beauty when airborne. Despite clouds and chilly temperatures, the birds’ performance was a revelation, a touching unity of human and animal behavior, with sky, water and the city.

Close to starting time for the piece, a commission by Creative Time, the nonprofit arts organization, and the Navy Yard, only anticipation was in the air. The bleachers set up at water’s edge were filled with people; the pigeons, meanwhile, crowded onto the roofs of their coops. Mr. Riley and his crew had built these domiciles on the upper deck of the Baylander, a decommissioned Navy vessel used as a landing pad for helicopters during the Vietnam War. The birds lined their roofs like sailors on deck waiting for their ship to dock.



Pigeons fly above the Baylander, a decommissioned Navy ship.
Byron Smith for The New York Times

Dusk settled, bringing the first sign of the pending performance: the scores of porthole openings on the coops were shuttered. Our attention was secured when loudspeakers burst forth with amplified burbling coos and intermittent kerfuffles: A microphone in the birds’ midst made it feel as if we were up there with them, too. Suddenly the speakers cut off, and the ankle-lights flashed on. Mr. Riley and three assistants stepped onto the roofs, waving long bamboo poles with black garbage bags attached to the ends. They evoked the

dark silhouettes of chimney sweeps, while emitting whistles, yips and whoops like cowhands at a roundup. The birds rose instantly into the air, their lights resembling fireworks in suspended animation. At first they circled round and round above the boat, as if stirred by the revolving poles.

Anyone, like me, who was expecting Busby Berkeley-like precision was quickly disabused of the notion. (While trainable, pigeons also have minds of their own; some regularly attempted to return to the boat only to be gently shooed away by their handlers.)



Pigeons aboard the Baylander before the beginning of "Fly by Night."
Byron Smith for The New York Times

But other more encompassing pleasures presented themselves as we leaned back and focused on the birds, which also heightened awareness of the fading light and the brightening buildings beyond. We watched the complex choreographies that ensued as the birds broke into smaller groups, moving in and out of our field of vision and alternately crisscrossing one another's trails (conjuring air battles) or weaving together into larger flocks. The groups' speeds varied; some drifted while others accelerated. Loner pigeons flew in and out, dodging the groups, sometimes coming in so low over the audience that it appeared they might land.

Though the lights didn't always work, they were a wonderful addition. The birds never quite blended into the sky and so there were two slightly different patterns, their dark silhouettes and the lights, which alternately suggested speeding constellations or overactive fireflies. After about 30 minutes, the birds were whistled home, as the shutters were reopened, the lights inside the coops went on and reggae and rock music began to play loudly (including — what else? — "When Doves Cry" by Prince). The pigeons slid in gradually, at their own speeds, until only a small group remained circling directly above the boat, and then its members also touched down.

Mr. Riley has been around pigeons since he was a child. As an artist he has used them in other performances — he spent eight months training 50 pigeons to carry contraband cigars, and cameras to record the event, from Cuba to Key West, Fla. — and he has depicted them sympathetically in mosaics, paintings and marvelous drawings, as evidenced by the website of MagnanMetz, the Chelsea gallery that represents him.

The effectiveness of "Fly by Night" reflected this bond, especially in his ability to keep the birds close to the boat rather than allowing them disperse in the city's immensity. Most special about watching these pigeons was the silence of their flight. Somewhat like trees, but more mysteriously, they seemed to make visible the wind's movements. They also created a soundless music heard with the eyes, a Beethovenian swirl of melodies and themes. Both sensations brought a sharper appreciation of space and air as active or sheltering forces that we share with all living things.

"Fly By Night" will be performed Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights through June 12 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, Navy Street and Sands Street. Admission is free; tickets are fully reserved through creativetime.org and there is a wait list for a number of tickets that will be released on Monday. Start time is adjusted to sunset and will be between 7 and 7:30 p.m., weather permitting. Among the things pigeons apparently don't do is fly in inclement weather.

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