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Pigeon Performance Art

By ROBIN POGREBIN FEB. 4, 2016



The artist Duke Riley, with an associate, preparing for his performance “Fly by Night.”

CreditWill Star/Creative Time

Pigeons wouldn't seem to be a draw in New York City. The prospect of thousands of them flying overhead in a concentrated area could strike some as a downright nightmare.

But to the Red Hook, Brooklyn, artist [Duke Riley](#), who has a long history with the birds, they are beautiful. And in May, with the public art group Creative Time, he is bringing a large trained flock to the Brooklyn Navy Yard for “Fly by Night.”

“I’ve been involved with pigeons most of my life,” he said. “Once people get involved with pigeons, it’s a very addictive relationship.”

MAGNANMETZ GALLERY

“I already find them mesmerizing to watch,” he added. “Other people may need a little bit of help.”

Mr. Riley [trained](#) homing pigeons to smuggle cigars from Havana to Key West, Fla., in his 2013 project “Trading With the Enemy,” and again in the Havana Biennial in 2015. He also lived and worked in a pigeon coop in Providence, R.I., from 1992 to 1997.

But this involves pigeons on a whole other scale. As the sun sets on Friday, Saturday and Sunday nights throughout the spring, Mr. Riley, using a whistle, will summon the birds from the Baylander, a converted boat once used as a landing spot for helicopters, docked at the Navy Yard. They will circle the river, with tiny LED lights wrapped around their legs like the bands that used to carry messages.

The show — which is free, though spaces in the yard must be [reserved](#) — honors both pigeon keeping and maritime culture. A century ago, one of the United States military’s largest pigeon coops was at Cob Dock, an island that was part of the Navy Yard. From there, homing pigeons were loaded onto Navy vessels from which they were sent out to relay military communications.

“Pigeons suffer a P.R. problem,” said Meredith Johnson, a Creative Time curator. “People have this sense that they’re rats with wings. But pigeons are incredibly complex.”

“He wants to bring them out of the shadows,” she added of Mr. Riley, “and make visible this history that people don’t think of when they see a pigeon in the park.”