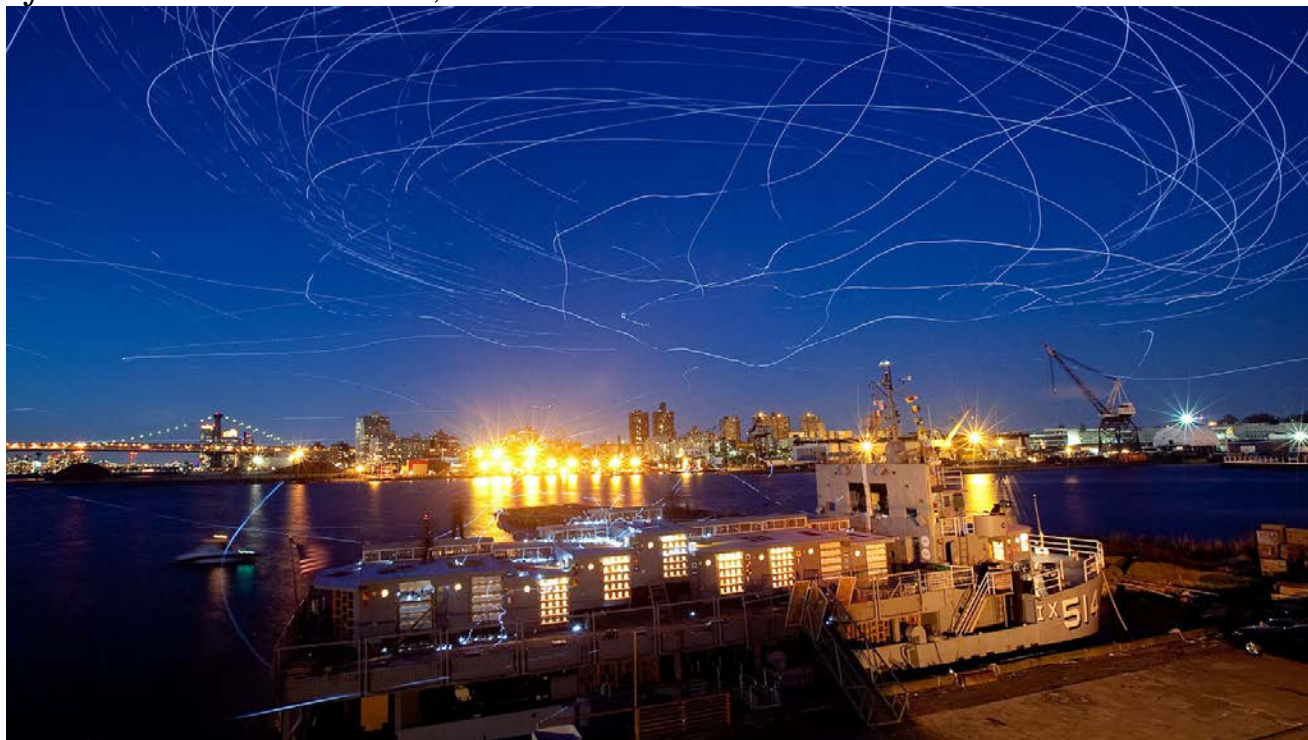


The New York Times

2,000 Pigeons Will Put on a Light Show in Brooklyn

By ANDY NEWMAN APRIL 28, 2016



When Pigeons Fly, Art Takes Wing

Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

Just past sunset on Saturday, a man standing atop an aircraft carrier along the Brooklyn waterfront waved a long bamboo pole with a black garbage bag attached to it, and hundreds of tiny lights shot up like sparks spat from a fire.

As the man whooped and hollered and raked the trash-bag flag like a giant windshield wiper, the lights climbed into the darkening sky, veering and banking, making and unmaking chaotic patterns, spreading and swirling until they filled half the heavens.

The lights were attached to the legs of trained pigeons. The man with the black flag was the artist [Duke Riley](#), impersonating a divebombing hawk as he prepared his winged charges for a mass performance piece called "[Fly by Night](#)."

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For six weekends, beginning on May 5 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, more than 2,000 pigeons will put on an avian-powered light show: Mr. Riley's valentine to the city, its historic shoreline, its oft-maligned spirit animal and the vanishing world of rooftop pigeon fanciers.

The birds have been staying in an 80-foot-long complex of coops — “waterfront luxury lofts,” Mr. Riley calls them — that he and his helpers erected on the deck of the Baylander, a decommissioned Vietnam-era Navy ship. The coops' rear windows look out onto Wallabout Bay, where there used to be an artificial island called Cob Dock that housed the Navy's first messenger-pigeon fleet.

Saturday's practice flight with a cast of only 700 birds — by turns vertiginous, majestic and faintly terrifying — evoked a series of alternate universes.

What if giant fireflies flew in clusters of hundreds? What if constellations moved really fast? What if fireworks could change direction at will?

What if the lights of the New York skyline suddenly took to the air?

Mr. Riley, a rugged-looking 43-year-old Boston transplant, has used pigeons to carry his message before. For his 2013 piece “[Trading With the Enemy](#),” he dispatched a small flock from Havana to Key West. Half of the birds smuggled back Cuban cigars attached like bomber payloads to their undersides, while the other half were outfitted with cameras to document the crime.



The artist Duke Riley and some of his winged charges, atop the Baylander, a decommissioned Vietnam-era aircraft carrier. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

“Fly by Night,” Mr. Riley explained while sitting in the pilot house of the Baylander with a white-winged assistant named Tofu perched on his shoulder, is a different sort of adventure.

Mr. Riley's work has tended toward the cheekily transgressive. Before the Cuban cigar caper, there were [the submarine that got too close to the Queen Mary 2](#), and the [naval battle on the World's Fair](#)

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[grounds](#) in Queens that went up in literal flames, and the [speakeasy in his tattoo parlor](#) in Greenpoint, Brooklyn, and the other speakeasy [under the Belt Parkway](#). (Mr. Riley's installations often involve the opportunity to drink.)

"A lot of the projects I do," he said, "are ones where I ask for forgiveness rather than permission."

But there is nothing cheeky or, as far as Mr. Riley knows, illegal about "Fly by Night." Try this for sincerity:

"I'd been living in New York for about 20 years," he said, "and I wanted to create this beautiful visual experience to share with people here, in the way of my general appreciation that the city has given me so much."

This prankster cringed at his own words. "I sound like a politician saying that, but it's true!"

The inspiration for "Fly by Night" came during the gestation of "Trading With the Enemy," when a friend gave Mr. Riley an old military manual on training pigeons for night missions. "I put a light on one of the birds, and it made me think about what it would be like to see more of them," Mr. Riley said. "It was almost like this shooting star going across the skyline of Brooklyn."

Realizing his vision took more than a year and the help of [Creative Time](#), the nonprofit that mounts ambitious site-specific works like Kara Walker's [great sugar sphinx](#) at the old Domino factory in Brooklyn and the twin-beamed [Tribute in Light](#) presented annually at ground zero.



Mr. Riley and Tofu, a pigeon he helped raise. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

Creative Time found [the Baylander](#) and secured the site at the Navy Yard.

Mr. Riley spent about six months assembling the performers, a task he found in some ways dishearteningly easy, given its magnitude.

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“Probably close to two-thirds of the birds here are, in a sense, rescues,” he said, “from people I knew in the pigeon community in New York who were forced to give up their birds.” Development pressure, landlord problems and pigeon-unfriendly neighbors are squeezing out pigeon keepers all over the city. One pigeon chronicler, [Colin Jerolmack](#), estimates that fewer than 200 people now raise pigeons in the city, down from thousands in the 1960s.

A few of the birds in “Fly by Night” are veterans of “Trading With the Enemy”; others are on loan from friends.

The birds come in a dazzling array of breeds and colors and patterns — Russian highfliers with distinguished silver heads; Damascenes, white with black racing stripes; brown-collared, acrobatic Rollers; red-beaked New York Flights; Ice pigeons with delicate black wing tracings.

(When the piece is finished, Mr. Riley said, many of the birds will go to “this guy Gil who lost his pigeons in a fire a few weeks ago in Bushwick.”)

The next step was to build suitable quarters for his troops: 13 coops, varying in size and occupancy, that nod at coop designs from the Middle East, Europe and the United States while emerging harmoniously from the boxy gray structure of the ship.

“I was trying to make it look like various kinds of pigeon coop architecture,” Mr. Riley said. “But I also wanted to make it look like all the birds walked into the recruiting station drunk and woke up with a hangover and a buzz cut.”

The lights, three-lumen LEDs, were a headache unto themselves, said Katie Hollander, Creative Time’s executive director. “We had to be able to turn them on remotely” — off-the-shelf LED bulbs work manually — “and then have the batteries last long enough for three performances.”



The pigeons live in an 80-foot-long complex of pigeon coops — “waterfront luxury lofts,” Mr. Riley calls them — on the deck of the Baylander. Credit Byron Smith for The New York Times

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The LED lights were designed by a team led by [10xBeta](#), based at the Navy Yard. A technician in China designed a special radio-frequency identification pigeon-light circuit, and an American manufacturer made casings for the equipment that were snapped into standard bird bands by volunteers at the ship.

All the birds have their light bands taken off twice a week so that they can bathe: Pigeons, notwithstanding their reputations, are fastidiously clean, Mr. Riley said. “We put a little kiddie pool on the roof.”

The cost of the entire project remains undisclosed. “That, we try not to really talk too much about,” Ms. Hollander said.

The performances of “Fly by Night” are free, but seats must be [reserved online](#) and there’s a waiting list.

The illuminated birds may be visible from other nearby vantage points, like the Williamsburg Bridge or the Farragut public housing complex in Fort Greene, but not in any predictable way. This was made apparent on Saturday when one cluster of pigeons headed for Downtown Brooklyn.

“Keep an eye on that piece!” Mr. Riley called out from the Baylander. “I want to make sure they come back here and don’t end up going to somebody else’s coop.”

The pigeons are trained only to return eventually to the ship, not to fly specific patterns; their choreography is entirely their own.

After about half an hour, Mr. Riley laid down his flag, the lights went on inside the coops, and as the lilting dancehall reggae song “[Pigeon Rock](#),” by Sister Nancy, played over loudspeakers, the birds returned home, though a few stragglers tarried, forming points of light on nearby rooftops.

Soon, there was a silhouette in every coop window, and Mr. Riley declared the practice a success. “The birds seemed to fly pretty well,” he said. “Usually, people want their birds to fly in tight bundles. Some guys don’t like it when one bird will fly off by itself. But I like that — some pigeons doing their own thing, acting of their own free will.”

“Fly by Night” premieres on May 5, then runs Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays through June 12 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. It is free, but tickets must be [reserved online](#) and there’s a waiting list. More tickets will be added on May 9. creativetime.org/projects/flybynight.