

ARTNEWS

DUKE RILEY ON HIS AIRBORNE PROJECT FOR CREATIVE TIME, STARRING THOUSANDS OF HIS BELOVED PIGEONS

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Duke Riley with his pigeons.
PHOTO BY WILL STAR/COURTESY CREATIVE TIME

If Duke Riley never brought ink to paper, never went to art school, and never signed with a Chelsea gallery, he would still be known as one of the reigning outlaw party-throwers and provocateurs in New York.

There was *The Dead Horse Inn* in 2005, an installation for which Riley led a group of revelers to Plumb Island, a remote part of Brooklyn abandoned since Robert Moses ran a highway across from it in the 1930s. With boxing matches taking place in the middle of a raucous party and ten-cent whiskeys being

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sold behind a makeshift bar, it was an evening that hearkened back to a time when homesteaders declared the island free from the reaches of the New York City government and pursued activities not welcomed in the boroughs.

There was *The Battle of Brooklyn* in 2007, in which Riley attempted to conjure the spirit of '76 by building a Revolutionary War-era submarine and floating it up to the Queen Mary II, then docked at the Red Hook cruise-ship terminal—a protest against post-9/11 paranoia and the remaking of Riley's beloved working-class waterfront into a place tourists sailed by on their way to Manhattan.

And then there was 2009's *Those About To Die Salute You*, a performance for which Riley filled up a vacant pool at the Queens Museum with water and had staffers from local museums battle it out in boats made of hay, T-shirts, and cardboard while onlookers flung tomatoes and dodged fireworks. The name alluded to the violent spectacles Roman emperors would hold to placate the masses in times of economic difficulty, much as the recession was then rocking the art world and other New York industries. Riley, dressed as Caesar, presided over all.

For his latest, Riley is turning his attention to something far less grandiose: the humble pigeon. By using this ubiquitous creature in an installation, Riley is hoping make a statement about the way urban life is seemingly both determined to drive us to distraction and intent on stamping out anything uncontrolled and wild.

"They are misunderstood, they really are," Riley said of his beloved pigeons. "They are this animal that exists in pretty much every city in the world, but were brought here by people and for a long time served some kind of purpose. They are resilient. And we have a relationship and a responsibility to them."

Riley was standing onboard *The Baylander*, a Vietnam War-era 131-foot aircraft carrier once used to train helicopter pilots that's now docked in the Brooklyn Navy Yard. Riley has commandeered the flight deck and built pigeon coops—enough to house over 2,000 birds—and during six successive weekends beginning in early May, he will unleash *Fly By Night*, a Creative Time-backed production in which, at twilight, those birds will be released into the air above Wallabout Bay. As the sun settles over the city, viewers will come to see that tiny LED lights have been attached to the pigeons, creating a massive, moving, low-flying constellation that then returns back to the boat on Riley's call after a half hour or so.

It is, in part, a tribute to a vanishing New York City pastime.

“There was a time when practically every rooftop in Manhattan had a pigeon coop on it,” said Riley, who still sounds like he plies his trade on the Boston fish piers where he worked as a kid. “Now there’s probably 100 people in the five boroughs that keep pigeons. It was this shared social activity that is now almost completely disappeared.”

Riley still keeps pigeons on the roof of his Red Hook home. Some have been transferred to the Navy Yard in order to take part in the artwork, but pigeon keeping is a fragile and sometimes frustrating pastime. One group is there because their owners’ building was sold and the new landlord wanted nothing to do with the creatures. Another was told that his large coops looked too much like an illegal addition, and a building inspector insisted that it come down or Riley would face a heavy fine.

Riley, who lived in a pigeon coop when he first moved to New York City, attributes the loss of pigeon keeping as a hobby to that perennial New York City plague: rising property values. Rooftops where pigeon keepers once put on a show for the street below have been converted to private decks, which New Yorkers prefer to the far less civilized hangout spot of old, the front stoop. Pigeons, as Riley sees it, are the embodied projection of all of our urban sins. If they are dirty, it is because of the gunk we have let clog our air and streets. If they are diseased, it is because of the processed food we have left on the ground that they have been forced to clean up. If they are un-pretty, it is because we have lost the capacity to properly see. (In 2007 the New York City Council went so far as to suggest a ban on pigeon feeding and the institution of a pesticide that would serve as birth control.)

At Creative Time, the hope is that *Fly By Night* will become as big a phenomenon as Kara Walker’s *A Subtlety*, the sugar Sphinx sculpture that had visitors lined up around the block at the former Domino Sugar Factory (which has since been demolished) in 2014.

“This is an artist’s dream project,” said Katie Hollander, the executive director of Creative Time. “Duke has been dreaming about this for years.”

Creative Time curated Riley’s previous foray into pigeon-related works, *Trading with The Enemy*, in which he trained 50 pigeons to fly from Cuba to Key West carrying Cuban cigars.

“Duke is an explorer and old soul and that comes out in his work,” said Hollander. “He does a lot of research and he is very knowledgeable about the sites he is working on, the history of the subject matter. Because his projects are very much about telling a story and dealing with subject matter that we all have a relationship with, they are something we all resonate with in one way or another.”

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“I think he is someone who is all about pushing the envelope,” said Dara Metz, who co-owns Magnan Metz Gallery in Chelsea and who began representing Riley when he was still in graduate school. “Once he gets the green light, or if he doesn’t get the green light, it is all about adding more and more to the mix and seeing what you can get away with.”

In the months that Riley has been preparing for *Fly By Night*, his corner of the Navy Yard has becoming something of a hangout for the city’s remaining pigeon keepers. Jose, who showed a video he keeps on his phone of the pigeons he keeps on his roof in Bushwick—“This is like therapy for me,” he said—grilled hamburgers and sausages while Riley and his crew of assistants and volunteers drank beer out of cans and talked about how to keep the birds in good-enough condition for the performance.

As dusk fell, Riley climbed back up to the boat. The pigeons were released into the sky, thousands of them. Some just decamped to a nearby roof, but others stuck together in a handful of clusters, eddying and swirling above the bay. Riley stayed on the deck, waving a black flag stuck to a large wooden pole in order to keep the birds from coming home too early. Only a few had lights attached to them—the lights were still being constructed in a nearby facility—but the sight was oddly moving, with the birds looking like brushstrokes across the sky, gliding over cars making their way home over the Williamsburg Bridge.

“The relationship of water to the city keeps surfacing in my work,” Riley said. “I have this need to personally seek out that space and use that space. Here you have this city of 8 million people and then all of sudden you go out there and there are a million creatures above and below you and you are all alone.”