



Bye Bye Birdies! Artist Duke Riley's Pigeon Performance Takes Flight



Every weekend for the next month, the artist will release hundreds of lit-up pigeons into the Brooklyn night sky.

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Tomorrow night, the artist Duke Riley will release hundreds of pigeons from a decommissioned battleship anchored at the Brooklyn Navy Yard as part of the three-month performance series he's doing in partnership with [Creative Time](#). "I've always had birds on a small scale ... but nothing quite like this," the Brooklyn-based artist admitted.

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Known for his avian-leaning multimedia and performance work, Riley has raised and flown pigeons his whole life—he even spent three of his teenage years living in a coop (“Rent was \$25 a month!”). But the idea to fly them at night only came a year ago when a friend passed him a copy of a World War II manual, which detailed how the Allied Forces used carrier pigeons to communicate after dusk. Riley was instantly inspired by the idea, and decided to give it a go himself. “I had already made bird harnesses for a previous project, so I popped in LED lights to see how it would look to fly them in the dark,” he explained. He likened the result to a “moving constellation” or “a painting in the sky.”

The project blends two very different subjects that have inspired Riley throughout his career—birds and the urban waterfront—the latter of which he has spent over twenty years meticulously researching, studying maps and reading in-depth accounts of maritime happenings. “Whenever I do a project it begins at a waterfront,” he claimed.

Through this series of performances, Riley hopes to highlight the historical significance of both the Brooklyn Navy Yard, which was once home to the largest pigeon coop in the U.S., and the city’s rich relationship with the species. “There used to be a pigeon coop on every roof in Manhattan,” he explained. “It’s a tradition that’s been part of New York culture for more than 100 years.”

Currently stationed in a coop aboard the battle ship, the birds will fly overhead in a tight circular formation every weekend through mid-June. Or so he hopes. “At the end of the day they act of their own free will,” he said with a shrug. “It’s hard to let pigeons go because they keep flying back to you. So you’re kind of in a jam when it comes to getting rid of them.”