



# Brooklyn Paper

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**THE GREATEST  
STORY  
EVER**



Artist training thousands of pigeons to carry lights over Navy Yard for new show



Photo by Will Star

Above the rest: Artist Duke Riley has been training and flying pigeons since he was a boy, but he will fly more birds than ever before in his new show at the Navy Yard.

**BY LAUREN GILL**  
*Brooklyn Paper*

Call it a flight of fancier.

A Red Hook artist known for bizarre public performance pieces is now training thousands of pigeons to fly in formation over the East River while toting tiny lights on their legs for a series of shows at the Navy Yard in May. It is art, he said, but also a way to celebrate the species often pigeon-holed as “rats of the sky” and the dying New York pastime of pigeon keeping.

“I hope it brings attention to a greater appreciation of pigeons in general, and maybe draws more interest in the activity,” said Duke Riley, whose previous endeavours include [sailing a home-made submarine in Red Hook waters](#), [creating an illegal bar under the Belt Parkway](#), and [staging a mock naval battle inside a fountain while toga-wearing audience members hurled tomatoes and baguettes at him](#).

Every Friday, Saturday, and Sunday during the month, Riley — who has been a “pigeon fancier” himself since he rescued one as a boy growing up in Boston — will summon the performers via a whistle at sunset, then send the birds soaring out of a ship at the dockyard to light up the sky in a piece called “Fly By Night.”

Many New Yorkers mistakenly think of the city-slicking birds as disease-ridden pests, says Riley, even though breeding and training the species has been a borough tradition for more than 100 years. But the art is fading as more landlords refuse to let locals keep the birds on rooftops, and replace coops with lounge chairs and grills, he said.

“A lot of people complain and don’t want them, even though they used to be such a New York staple,” said Riley.

Riley said he first got the idea for the show while reading a military pigeon-training manual. The army used the birds — renowned their ability to fly non-stop for long distances — to carry messages during World War I and II, and the Navy Yard used to have one of the largest bird boot camps in the country.

This isn’t Riley’s first performance piece starring pigeons — [he trained 50 birds to smuggle cigars from Cuba to Florida as a comment on the trade embargo in 2013](#) — but it is his largest.

The artist had to recruit troops from his friends in the New York pigeon-fancying community to reinforce his own personal flock and complete his massive avian army. And he will have help from public art organization Creative Time — the outfit behind the giant sphinx statue in the old Domino sugar factory in 2014, and the two giant beams of light at Ground Zero on the six-month anniversary of 9–11 — in staging the ambitious show.

Riley swears the stars of the show will be well cared for — he has hired a vet and a team of handlers to look after them and the city will give each one a clean bill of health ahead of the show. And because pigeons mate for life, he says he has made sure pairs and their offspring are being kept together.

The performances will be free to the public, but those who want to see them up close will need to reserve their spot online.

*"Fly By Night" at Brooklyn Navy Yard (63 Flushing Ave. at Eighth Street in Fort Greene, [www.creativetime.org/projects/flybynight](http://www.creativetime.org/projects/flybynight)). Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays in May. Free.*

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