

CINEMA(/CINEMA,58) + MUSIC(/MUSIQUE,59) + BOOKS(/LIVRES,60)
+ SCENES(/THEATRE,28) + ARTS(/ARTS,99964)
+ IMAGERY(/IMAGES,100296) + LIFESTYLE(/VOUS,15)
+ FASHION(/MODE,99924)
+ BEAUTY(HTTP://WWW.LIBERATION.FR/BEAUTE,100215)
+ FOOD(/FOOD,100293)

REPORTAGE

AMERICA PIGEON

By Philippe Lançon Special Envoy to New
York(<https://www.liberation.fr/auteur/1952-philippe-lancon>)
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Operation "Trading with the Enemy" where 11 of the 23 pigeons from Cuba returned to Florida in July. Photo Kitty Joe St. Mary. Courtesy of Riley Duke and Magnan Metz Gallery.

The American artist Duke Riley, who is also a pigeon fancier, is guided by a key word, freedom. His last challenge is to thwart his country's monitoring of Cuba.

Like Ghost Dog, the hero of Jim Jarmusch, Duke Riley raises pigeons in America. But he is neither black, nor fat, nor killer, nor samurai, nor lonely. He is a white, smiling, 41-year-old man with bright eyes and an amused, muscular and largely tattooed look, a cross between a Cape Cod sailor - where he grew up - and a Brooklyn artist - where he lives and works. A big pigeon is drawn on his right bicep. His people coo in old crates, on the floor of an old warehouse overlooking a canal. In the distance, it's Manhattan. Other artists are working here. There are paintings, sculptures, blocks of materials, waste. A steel horse stands at the entrance, ready for the apocalypse. Of Irish origin, graduated in painting and sculpture, Duke lives partly tattoos and could be called conceptual hero if his projects had a fantasy, and even a quackery, which escapes this austere qualifier. Its mission seems to be to carry out unthinkable and infeasible operations to emphasize the absurdity, but also the possibilities of the world in which we must live. All are related to the sea, war and borders. All are incongruous manifestations of freedom. These are the adventures of Captain Duke. The last is called war and borders. All are incongruous manifestations of freedom. These are the adventures of Captain Duke. The last is called war and borders. All are incongruous manifestations of freedom. These are the adventures of Captain Duke. The last is called *"Trade project with the enemy"*.

Some time ago, Duke brought twenty-three pigeons to Havana to return from Cuba to Key West, Florida. How did he transport the critters and circumvent the customs? There are many pigeon fanciers in Cuba. Who welcomed them on the spot, nourished, revived, since where? Duke smiled: *"I can not tell you, since everything in this operation involves people who have to stay hidden."* Some pigeons carried a miniature camera that filmed their stolen flight. Others wore a Cuban cigar, a product banned in the United States. The cameras came from China, *"but I can not tell you much more, except that they arrived without any instructions"*. The 90-mile ocean that separates the island from Florida has not damaged them. The first cigar that arrived in Key West, Duke smoked: *"It was excellent."* He usually does not smoke.

An ironic patriot

Duke Riley has been a pigeon fancier for a long time. He trained his pigeons in Key West, moving them away from their dovecotes, on land, then at sea, to teach them how to return. The pigeon fancier, like the artist, is a patient man. He sets his plans with the meticulousness and daring of a child - like the kid who, entering *the Treasure Island* or the *Moonfleet Smugglers'* Cave, decides not to go out.

His operations are political games. The clandestine flight of birds was made to recall the *"inanity and hypocrisy"* of the *Trading with the Enemy Act*. This law, dating from 1917, forbids the Americans any trade with the enemy. Until 2008, North Korea and Cuba were the two countries targeted. From now on, only Cuba remains. *"As an American,"* says Duke, *"I can do my business in North Korea, Iran, but I do not have the right to do so with this much more dangerous country than Cuba. Cuba has never really been hostile to us."*

He likes to call himself a *"patriot"*. But he is an ironic patriot, so a critical citizen: *"This country spends billions of dollars to protect its borders. It is vain. My pigeons defy this technology and they do it successfully. In Key West, there are small sophisticated airships, extremely expensive, designed to find everything that comes from Cuba. They escaped from them."* Just as Afghan donkeys drove Al-Qaeda's messages out of electronic surveillance. Moreover, when we hang out in Key West, *"we still meet many people who live by traffic. All have stories to tell. Smuggling is an old tradition in American history. It is useless to deny it."* On his site, Duke sums up his work: *"Treating the forgotten but forgotten borders, which nobody cares about, on the border or inside urban areas with unsuspected autonomy. What interests me is the struggle of the marginalized to maintain independent spaces within a society that seeks to envelop them."*

Out of the twenty-three outlaw pigeons, eleven returned: *"That does not mean that the others are dead, but simply that they are lost. They were able to land on a boat, somewhere on land or still drown."* All had been

baptized by Duke. Those who have fulfilled their mission are Pablo Escobar, Dynamite Johnny, Roman Polanski, Margaret Sanger, Joseph Hague, Hao Wu, Max Hardcore, Leon Gast, Lindsay Sandiford, Pierre Lafitte.

They are names of smugglers, living or dead, of a Colombian drug trafficker (Escobar), filmmakers or documentalists pursued by the American or Chinese courts (Polanski, Hao Wu). Among the missing, there was Ruggero Deodato, the Italian director of *Cannibal Holocaust*. In 1979, rumors accused him of killing actors during the shooting. It was wrong. Duke's morality is always tempered by his lightness and evil spirit.

It suddenly comes to mind that his project looks like *having or not*. Hemingway's novel tells the story of Harry Morgan, who smuggles between Key West and Cuba. In English, it's called: *To Have and Have Not*. Duke smiles: "*Two pigeons are called To Have and Have Not.*" "Have Not" is the eleventh survivor. "To Have" has disappeared. The "Pigeon Project" earned their master, in October, a cultural *New York Times*. So far, the US authorities have not reacted. The artist is not unknown to them.

Four years ago, Duke went to Havana for the first and only time. He hangs out in the streets, meets people, manages to approach officials. He tells them about his project: to organize a parade in the heart of Old Havana, in O'Reilly Street, to celebrate the Irish St. Patrick's Day. Alejandro O'Reilly, born in Dublin in the XVIIIth century, became a famous Spanish military. In 1763, he took back Havana to the English, then he married a Cuban. Duke's projects are always informed by naval military history. In 2007, he built with friends a copy of the Turtle, a small wooden submarine designed by American settlers to sink, through mines, the English ships during the War of Independence. They approach, without authorization, the *Queen Mary 2*, stowed in New York. The police stop them. One of Duke's friends is a descendant of the *Turtle* Builder .

Another time, with the Queens Museum of Art, the artist organizes a naval battle in the Roman genre, on a huge pool. Weapons are baguettes of bread, tomatoes. Ships sink quickly. "*It's a success,*" said Duke, "*since there were no drowned, no wounded, no prisoners.*" He has that kind of humor.

How does he manage to convince the Cuban authorities to let him set up his parade for an Irish party that almost everyone ignores on the island? Bringing others into the logic of one's own eccentricity is one of Duke Riley's virtues: *"It just shows you can have fun trying to push the cork."* That's how it floats. Some carnival videos are online. At the top, there is Farah, a famous Cuban transvestite, followed by other *"locas"*, as they say there. Comment by Duke: *"The life of homosexuals is not easy in Cuba, the authorities have led their lives hard. It was a way of supporting them by partying, simply."* He loved Havana very much, but he spoke too much in the press with his usual distance, and was told he was no longer welcome there. His pigeons went there for him.

Chinese Bestiary

The taste of the sea comes from childhood. An uncle held fisheries. Duke Riley worked for him and quickly began to sail: *"Maritime areas are both porous and autonomous spaces. There are things going on that can not happen elsewhere. The only hierarchy that is worth is that of know-how. The rest, we do not care."* With friends, Duke owns two boats. He sails often, especially in Key West. But his taste for aquatic demonstration can be declined elsewhere. Last year, it was in China.

With about fifteen other artists, he was sent there by the Department of State's Cultural Services and the Bronx Museum. Everyone had to set up a project that would involve the local population. They are only two months old. Duke surveys the Shanghai area in search of a place *"related to the history of sailors or fishermen"*. He moved to a small historic town, Zhujiiao.

A Chinese legend says that the animals of the zodiac race to reach the sky, through the water. The rat arrived first. He had cheated: *"I thought, why not run again, without the rat?"* A zoo and peasants provide him some animals, *"in such a bad state that I made sure to pass them on to less poor teachers"*. The dragon of the legend is a monitor of Komodo. The snake was to be a huge python, *"finally we took less big"*. Only the tiger is

missing, *"even though in China it is not so difficult to get one."* Children from the city draw the animals: the drawings inspire the costumes of the Chinese opera singers who will each embody one of the competitors.

In the absence of the tiger, on the day of departure, in April, eleven fishing boats are placed on the river, one per singer and per animal. Singers sing, animals swim. Everything is filmed. Duke arranged for the locals, *"who are great players, like all Chinese,"* to bet on the race, an initiative *"which did not please the US State Department."* The cat, unlike the legend, did not drown. As for the rat, he was allowed to compete: every cheater is a smuggler, who forces others to rethink boundaries and laws. The cow came second. It is the horse that has won.

Until January 11th, Duke Riley's projects are being exhibited at the Magnan Metz Gallery, in the Chelsea district of New York. You can see the surviving pigeons, their house, two harnesses of smugglers, six cigars brought back from Cuba, a giant mosaic of seashells, 50 portraits of pigeons, the film of the race in China, the drawings of the animals and the masks of the singers opera.

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