

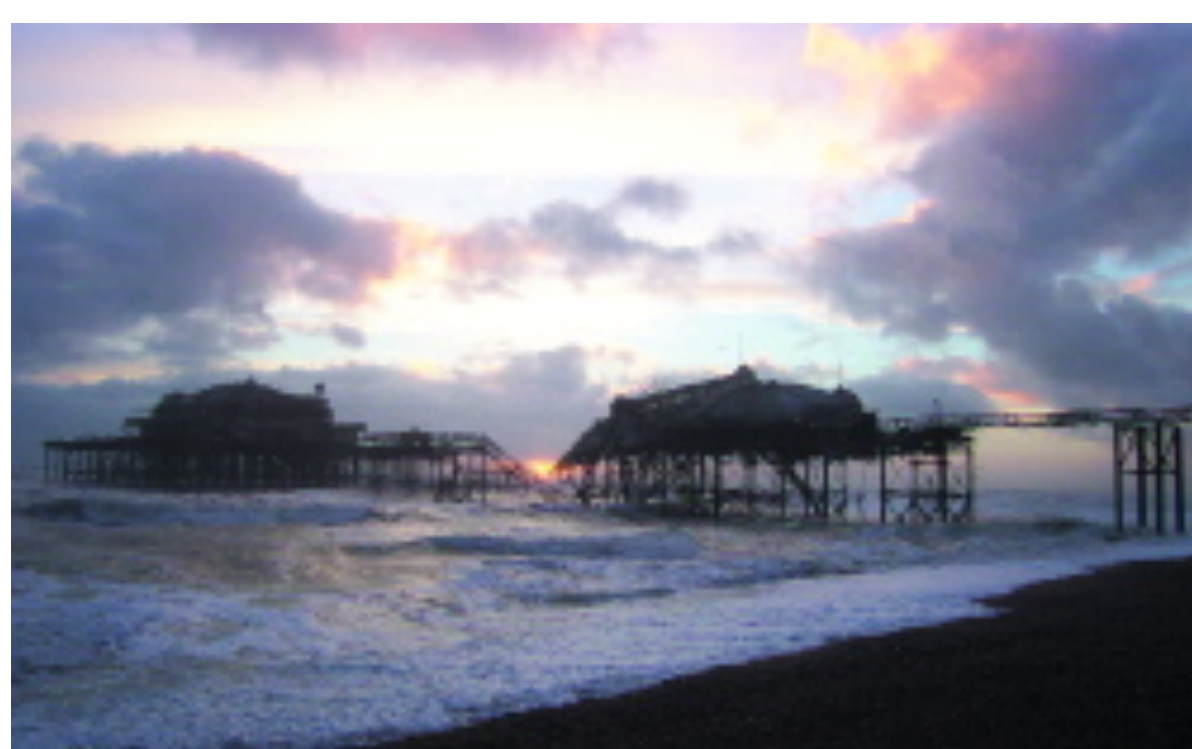
Opinion /



BY JENNIFER HIGGIE
03 MAR 2003

Pier Pressure

An Endangered Masterpiece of Victorian Engineering



A few years ago, The Heritage Lottery Fund made a grant for emergency repair work to be carried out on the skeletal remains of Eugenius Birch's masterpiece of Victorian engineering, the West Pier in Brighton - built in 1866 and the only Grade 1 listed pier in Britain. However, complicated legal disputes have delayed work and in recent months much of the pier has collapsed into the sea. The stumbling block has been a proposal for a controversial new retail and leisure centre to flank the entrance to the pier on the esplanade. The Guardian's architecture critic Jonathan Glancey has likened this to 'building a supermarket in Salisbury Close to pay for the restoration of the cathedral', although a spokesperson for the West Pier Trust has stated that 'without an enabling development of this scale on this site, there can be no restoration of the pier.' The Trust has reiterated its intention to go ahead with its rather mysterious first development aim: 'the authentic and lasting restoration and recreation of the pier, to its 1920s external appearance when, by common consent, the pier was at its architectural best.'

Severed from the land and worn away by over a century of ocean battering, weather, exploding mines and memories, the pier floats in the sea like the abandoned victim of an architectural post-mortem. From engineering masterpiece to local eyesore, for some the monument has become anti-monument. According to the Trust '... the blight caused by the state of the West Pier for the past quarter of a century has been more than physical; [...] its sad sight has represented a slide in national and local amenities and confidence which seemed to be irreversible.' Apparently, a 'historical' recreation of the pier will 'help to break that psychology of decline' - a comment which eerily recalls something Robert Smithson wrote: 'Time turns metaphors into things and stacks them up in cold rooms, or places them in the celestial playgrounds of the suburbs.' In fact, the surreal quality of this attempt to rescue the present by summoning the past is reminiscent of concerns central to Smithson's favourite film, Chris Marker's 1962 film *La Jetée* (The Jetty). In the film, scientist goalers try to change the history of a Paris devastated by a third world war by forcing a man to travel back in time to the pre-apocalyptic city. The film's narrator speaks of the 'the museum which is perhaps his memory' and in its corridors he witnesses 'a dateless world that stuns him by its splendour'. Ultimately, it is the time-traveller's desire to recreate a moment that he never experienced that destroys him. Watched by his younger self, he dies on the eponymous pier at the moment when memory and fabrication meet, a non-place that both literally and symbolically hovers between departure and arrival.

Piers have always had a strange relationship with the real. The West Pier was built at the height of Victorian pier mania to cater for steamer traffic and promenaders, but by the 1890s the attractions of a bracing stroll along its walkways had competition - the absurdist and quasi-scientific 'Tableau of a Cannon Fired by a Flea' and the spectacle of a real cannon fired by the sun's rays, which were focused onto its touch hole by a burning glass at precisely noon each day. The pier also managed to comfortably accommodate the Victorian passion for picturesque vistas and the natural elements: a turn of the century guide book describes how the pier 'provides an excellent view from its extremities creating an illusion of carefree cruising without any of the discomforts of the rolling ship'. In its 1920s heyday, visitors arrived on paddle steamer excursions to hear recitals by the pier's resident orchestra in the concert hall. Even the pier superstructure was ship-like, built to simulate the promenade deck of a liner, with deck chairs and bands. Until quite recently the staff on many of Britain's piers wore naval style uniforms and the pier master was required to have a master seaman's certificate.

When World War II broke out, a German invasion by pier was discouraged by the simple expedient of removing the central section and filling the sea around it with mines. A few years later, in readiness for D-Day, attempts were made to clear them, but at the West Pier one accidentally blew up in the face of bomb disposal expert, blinding him and destroying a kiosk and part of lower structure below. When the pier was restored a 'Helter Skelter' ride filled the gap. Never having fully recovered from the ravages of this wartime damage, the West Pier was closed to the public in 1975.



A few hundred metres across the water glitters the 'extensively re-furbished' Dorian Gray-like Palace Pier, designed by R. St. George Moore and opened in May 1899. A recent wander throughout its three acres involved a journey through many time systems. The 'Palace of Fun', with its original ironwork interior and stained glass windows, is, apparently now 'one of Europe's finest amusement arcades'. Inside, the ocean's horizon is replaced by that of the screen, a geography - not unlike that of the pier itself - that is cyclical, dislocating and repetitive. The archaic technologies of games such as 'Cracky Crab', 'Cranes' and pinball compete with travel simulators and video games - one of the most popular is Mortal Combat. Outside, at the end of the pier, rides and the karaoke bar (where the same song is different every time) jostle for attention. Crowds walk the length of the structure and back again, stopping only to eat, or at night to look at the moon through a telescope. Brighton piers, however, seem to be suffering from a surfeit of bad luck: recently the Palace Pier only narrowly survived a major fire which began under mysterious circumstances in the ghost train.

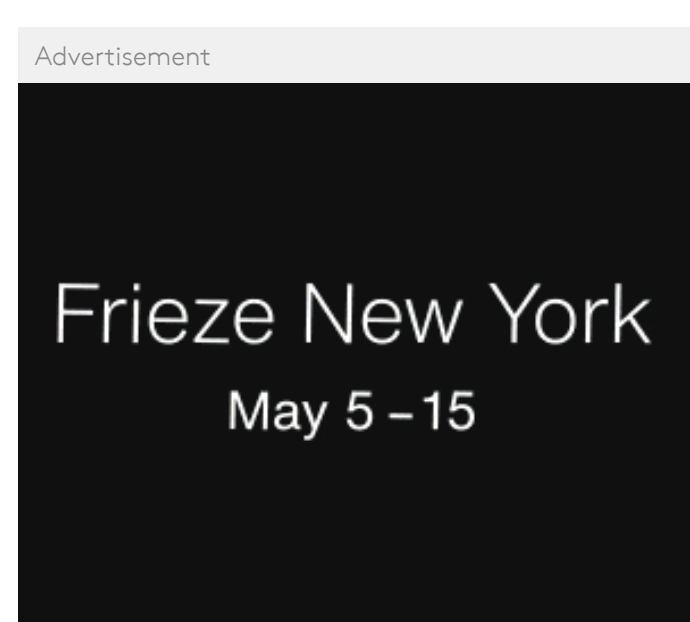
If on the Palace Pier the simple pleasures of a walk are countered by the mechanics of virtual destruction evident in its video arcade, the West Pier brutally manifests the literal damage that such imaginings might create. A structure initially built to assist the Victorian steam traveller, it is now more accustomed to the vagaries of time travel. That said, it's still difficult to imagine how an 'authentic' pier from the 1920s will be resurrected from such a ghost. 'Can't repeat the past ...' Jay Gatsby cries out incredulously shortly before being murdered as he dreams, floating on a sunlit swimming pool, '... why of course you can.'

JENNIFER HIGGIE

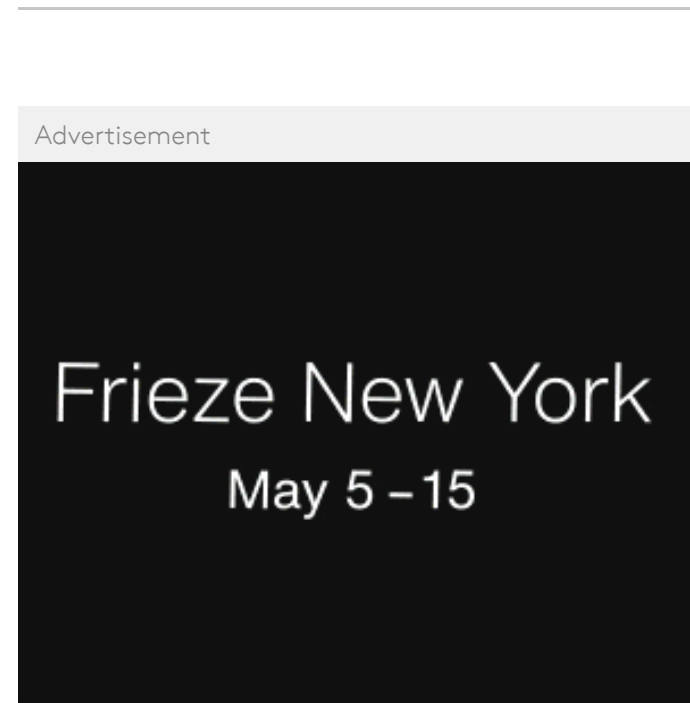
Jennifer Higgie is editor-at-large of *frieze*, based in London, UK. She is the host of *frieze's* first podcast, *Bow Down: Women in Art History*. Her book *The Mirror and the Palette* is forthcoming from Weidenfeld & Nicolson.

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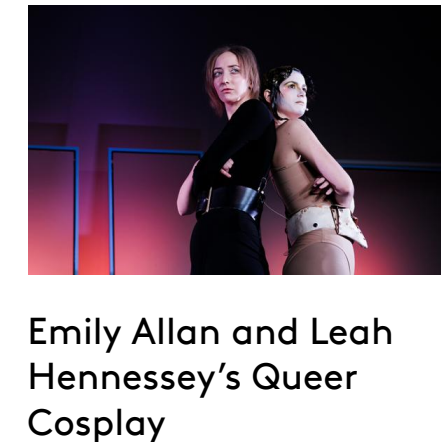
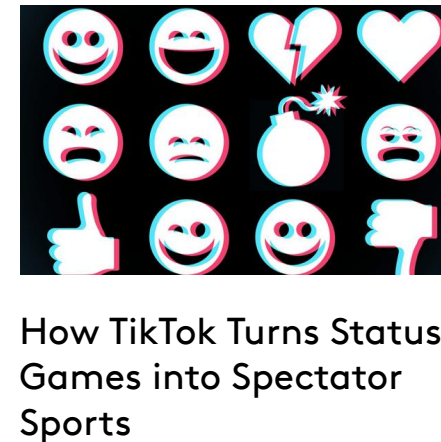
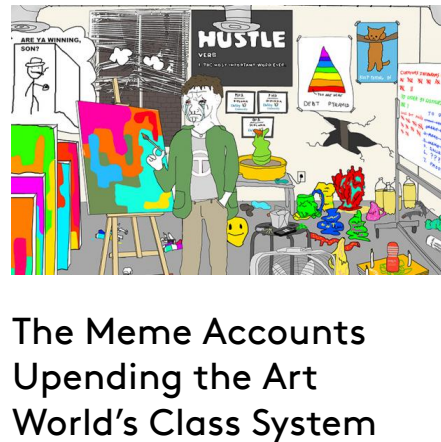
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VICTORIAN ENGINEERING

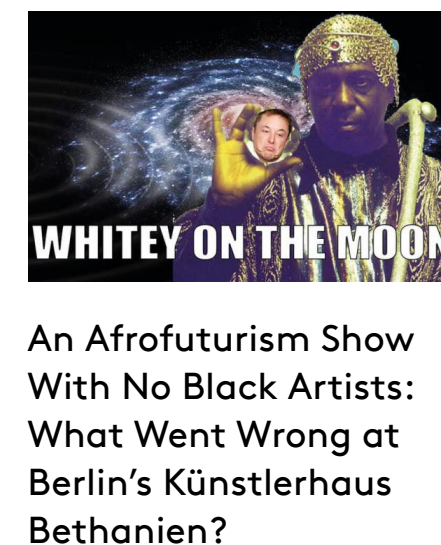
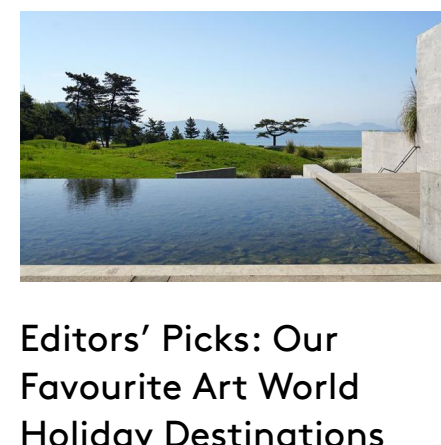
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