

Related Events

Exhibition Tours:

Led by History of Art students from the University of Bristol

Saturday 24 February 2018, 2–3pm
Saturday 17 March 2018, 2–3pm
Free, booking advised
History of Art students from the University of Bristol lead two tours of Iman Issa's exhibition.

Volunteer led tours

Friday 9 March, 2pm
Saturday 10 March, 2pm
Thursday 15 March, 2pm
Saturday 17 March, 2pm
Friday 23 March, 2pm
Thursday 29 March, 2pm
Sunday 1 April, 2pm (available in French)
Friday 6 April, 2pm
Thursday 12 April, 2pm
Free, just turn up
Spike Island volunteers lead guided tours of Iman Issa's exhibition.

Spike Island

133 Cumberland Road, Bristol BS1 6UX
Tel. 0117 929 2266
www.spikeisland.org.uk
admin@spikeisland.org.uk

Facebook.com/SpikelIsland
@_SpikelIsland
@SpikelIsland

Visitor Information

Gallery open Tuesday to Sunday, 12–5pm
(during exhibitions only).

Admission to the gallery is free.

Café open Monday to Friday, 8.30am–5pm
Saturday and Sunday, 10am–5pm.

Spike Island aims to be a fully accessible building.

Tour: The City as a Monument

Saturday 24 March, 11am–12pm
£5, limited to 25 participants, booking essential

Consider the 'city as a monument' in this special guided exploration across the city of Bristol with Peter Insole and Ruth Myers of Myers-Insole Local Learning.

The tour takes a circular route, beginning and ending at Spike Island gallery, to explore how the area has developed artistically alongside the regeneration of Bristol harbour.

Book for events online at www.spikeisland.org.uk, call 0117 929 2266 or visit reception.

The exhibition is a collaboration with Bielefelder Kunstverein, Germany where the artist presented her exhibition *Material* from 18 November 2017 to 28 January 2018.

Common Elements by Iman Issa was commissioned by The Abraaj Group Art Prize, 2013.

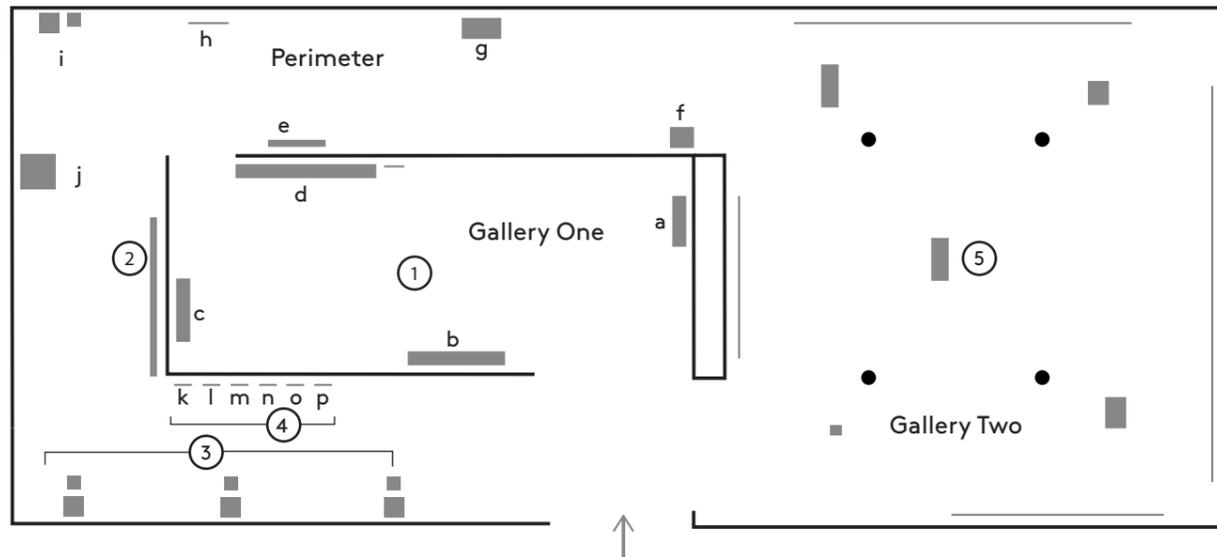


Exhibition Guide

Iman Issa *Material for 2018*

17 February to 15 April 2018

Spike Island



① Gallery One/Perimeter:

Material series:

- a *Material for a sculpture representing a monument erected in the spirit of defiance of a larger power* (2012)
Wooden sculpture, painted wooden plinth, vinyl text on wall
- b *Material for a sculpture commemorating an economist whose name now marks the streets and squares he once frequented* (2011)
Vitrine with various objects, vinyl text on wall
- c *Material for a sculpture proposed as an alternative to a monument that has become an embarrassment to its people* (2010)
Wooden sculpture, alternating lights in 30 second intervals, vinyl text on wall
- d *Material for a sculpture commemorating the life of a soldier who died defending his nation against intruding enemies* (2012)
Four painted wooden sculptures, painted wooden plinth, blank book with four colour inserts, painted white shelf, vinyl text on wall
- e *Material for a sculpture commemorating the victory of what initially appeared to be an inferior army* (2011)
Painted wooden structure with mirror top and red thread stretched across it, black thread with map pins stretched on wall, vinyl text on wall
- f *Material for a sculpture representing a bygone era of luxury and decadence* (2012)
Brass sculpture, painted wooden plinth, vinyl text on wall
- g *Material for a sculpture recalling the destruction of a prominent public monument in the name of national resistance* (2010)
Wooden sculpture with black tassel, painted white plinth, vinyl text on wall

h *Material for a sculpture acting as a testament to both a nation's pioneering development and continuing decline* (2011)
30 second sound piece playing in 5 minute intervals, speakers, vinyl text on wall

i *Material for a sculpture commemorating a singer whose singing became a source of unity of disparate and often opposing forces* (2011)
Wooden sculpture, c-print, two white plinths, vinyl text on wall

j *Material for a sculpture commemorating a blind man who became a great writer, opening up an unparalleled world of possibilities for the people of his nation* (2012)
Video on loop, tube monitor on painted white plinth, vinyl text on wall

② *The Revolutionary* (2010)

③ *The Book of Facts: A Proposition* (2017)

④ *Colors, Lines, Numbers, Symbols, Shapes, and Images* (2010)

- k Untitled Poster #1
- l Untitled Poster #2
- m Untitled Poster #3
- n Untitled Poster #4
- o Untitled Poster #5
- p Untitled Poster #6

⑤ Gallery Two:

Common Elements (2013) Framed text panels, framed c-prints, wooden sculptures, panel

The work in Iman Issa's exhibition deals with personal and collective memory, the relationship between the two, and how they can be communicated through objects and language.

Issa's primary methodology is to define the instrumental qualities of an object, image or text and to make alternative versions, drawing out the traits which she believes most adequately describe the original. She intends this neither as a reductive approach, nor a process of abstraction, but rather as a means of understanding the resonance – in the present moment – of historical artefacts, facts and histories.

Material (2010–2012) is a series of ten 'displays' presented as alternative forms to existing monuments and memorials. Works with titles such as *Material for a sculpture proposed as an alternative to a monument that has become an embarrassment to its people* (2010), question the resonance of monuments long after the passing of the events and public figures which they celebrate.

① a–j

The Revolutionary (2010) is an audio piece composed by the artist and generated using text to speech software. The work presents a fictional narrative woven around an attempt to understand the term 'revolutionary' and what this means in the present day.

②

Book of Facts: A Proposition (2017) is presented as a book documenting an exhibition that has never taken place and never will. The sources for the book are wide-ranging and bring together facts drawn from research into mythology, religion, the sciences, the origins of modern institutions like the army and the legal system, among other subjects. All of the material is formatted in the guise of information geared towards a specific thesis that can only be unraveled through engaging with the book's internal content and structure.

③

A set of six inkjet prints titled *Colors, Lines, Numbers, Symbols, Shapes and Images* (2010) scrutinises the symbolic language of election posters – whereby formal elements such as images, symbols and colours are instrumentalised towards motivating a specific outcome. Each print is given the name 'untitled poster' with a number, while collectively they become an index of specific places and events.

④ k–p

Common Elements (2013) – an installation of texts, photographs and sculpture – also shows how the stories of individuals can speak of wider political and social issues. Issa has selected passages from the autobiographies of four public figures who campaigned on social issues and human rights. Each text describes the writer's personal circumstance or recollection, but alludes to the wider historical context of their lifetime. The texts are complemented by a collection of photographs and sculptures made with reference to various museum displays seen by the artist.

⑤

Iman Issa

Iman Issa (b. 1979, Cairo) is an artist currently based in Berlin. Recent solo and group exhibitions include Hamburger Bahnhof, Berlin, MoMA, New York, the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, 21er Haus, Vienna, MACBA, Barcelona, the Perez Museum, Miami, the 12th Sharjah biennial, the 8th Berlin Biennial, MuHKA, Antwerp, Tensta Konsthall, Spånga, New Museum, New York, and KW Institute of Contemporary Art, Berlin. Her book *Common Elements* was published by the Glasgow Sculpture Studios in 2015 and *Thirty-three Stories about Reasonable Characters in Familiar Places* was published by the SculptureCenter in 2011. She has been named a 2017 DAAD Artist in Residence and is a recipient of the Vilcek Prize for Creative Promise (2017), Louis Comfort Tiffany Foundation Award (2015), HNF-MACBA Award (2012), and the Abraaj Group Art Prize (2013). Issa teaches at the Cooper Union School of Art.

Iman Issa interviewed by curator Elisa Kay

Elisa Kay: In the *Material* series you have made ten displays which reimagine public monuments and memorials that you have known or have memory of. Some people have described your methodology as a process of reduction, others as abstraction, but you have described it as an 'instrumental application of forms' – could you talk about what you mean by that?

Iman Issa: One thing I think it's important to say about the *Material* series, which extends to some other of my series, is that the forms you see are proposals and not conclusive forms. So they are forms that could potentially change. Presenting them in this manner is done in an attempt to open up the conversation about which forms might be adequate to describe these monuments. The work is not about the act of replacing one form with another but in understanding how the forms operate as carriers of meaning in the first place.

I don't believe I use abstraction to do this. On the contrary, I believe I'm starting from an abstraction to begin with, present in the original monuments and what they might stand for, and working towards the specific. When I say 'instrumental application of forms', it means to me that the forms - whether they be photographs or sculptures or texts - are all working in the realm of language. So, although an image has very different structural capacities to an object, or a written text, for me they are all working towards the communication of meaning.

EK: You do not name the places and people who are the subject of these monuments and memorials. How do you think this affects the way in which an audience understands the work?

II: When I was working with these specific memorials it was very clear to me that including the name of the figure or the date of the event is the least adequate way to recall this figure or this event. The criteria I decided to follow, was not about removing this information, but sticking to only the information I thought best captured the subject matter that was being commemorated.

When I started this series, I had a feeling that monuments and memorials were functioning in different capacities than they had before. For example, their capacity for pushing forward certain ideologies seemed to have greatly diminished, or perhaps it is the need for them to do so that had

diminished, I'm not sure. But they certainly didn't feel instrumental to the regime in power then. I became interested in what else they might be doing if it is not the propagation of a historical point of view. Might they actually serve as adequate references to the figures, events, and places they were commemorating in that case? Now of course, this moment has greatly shifted and monuments have become a site of ideological contestation once more, if not in Egypt, then certainly in the United States where I have been residing for the past 14 years. It seems that unlike ten years ago, when these forms appeared somewhat irrelevant, it does now matter greatly which monuments we choose to include in our public spaces and which names we give our schools, museums, city streets and squares. It seems once more worthwhile to fight to change these names and remove these forms. When and why this becomes the case is an interesting question for me.

EK: You use the museological term 'display' to describe sculptural objects, sometimes collections of artefacts. You use all the furniture of museum display such as plinths, vitrines and benches, and even the vinyl texts on the walls as an integral part of the work itself, not simply supporting it, or describing it. I'm interested in what draws you to this language of display.

II: What I mean by 'display' is a set of elements that relate to each other within a space. So, the work would not just be the object or film, but would include the text, the light, support structures as well as the space. I think exhibition spaces allow for certain conversations to happen and I'm interested in using them in order to try and figure things out. For me it's not about the deconstruction of the exhibition space or critique of museological displays, it's about using that space and its conventions to investigate matters that might be best investigated within such a space.

EK: For me, I feel like these display systems that you employ guide you to think 'here is something to look at', 'here is something to contemplate', or 'here is something to move around'.

II: That's kind of how I think of it as well, yes.

EK: *The Revolutionary* was made around the same time, but seems to have a different approach, it's a sound piece made from a text that you've written.

II: When I was working on *Material* it became very clear to me that my relationship to language was very similar to my relationship to forms. I felt that

there were certain words I could use and words I couldn't use. I was fetishizing every single term that went into the vinyl descriptions that are part of the *Material* displays. The term I kept running into again and again was 'revolutionary' and I could never use it because I felt I didn't have a sense of what it meant. So I decided to write a fictional narrative based on the term in an effort to understand what it might be referring to in the present moment. And I made this work *The Revolutionary*, which consists of an audio of a fictional story written by myself and generated using text-to-speech software.

EK: And why did you chose to work with text-to-speech?

II: I guess it relates to what I said about an instrumental application of forms, and wanting to follow that idiom to the maximum, so that everything there is there for a reason. I liked the idea that it was a machine that was reading the narrative. An actor struck me as being too unnecessarily specific. I believed that his or her voice would provide too much excess or affect that wasn't necessary to what the work was about or trying to do.

EK: *Common Elements* is an installation that places together fragments of text selected from the autobiographies of four public figures, along with photographs and sculptures. One of the phrases from *Common Elements* puts me in mind of the way I think you describe history, as not intrinsic to an original artefact, nor to historical fact, but existing in memory and lived experience. The phrase was:

"History was a street, a shop. It was in the sweets we ate, the shoes we wore, the schools we went to, in the plants and grass that grew on the walls, in the fights between teenagers. It was in all of this and more..."

Is that a fair understanding?

II: The criteria for picking these sentences were how they pertained to larger social, economic, political issues and were able to recall something more than the individual stories which they purport to tell. It has been clear to me for some time that certain events and experiences can only be communicated via the confines of memory and personal narrations. At the same time one is confronted with the question, of how to guarantee communication when the means relied on are as subjective and inaccessible as memory? And I guess it is both of

these thoughts that have driven me to investigate these personal narratives in that manner.

EK: The photographic images are mysterious, they seem coded, could they be deciphered, or are they presented as something more meditative, or a series of loose threads in the work, to be picked up or dropped?

II: So, these are all based on museum displays. I was looking for material or ways to further illustrate or demonstrate this dynamic where the individual narrative turns into something more. I spent maybe a year and a half not being able to come up with any images. I was doing all kinds of things such as taking descriptions from the book and trying to construct settings out of them. I would photograph the places the authors lived in or spoke of. Nothing worked. At one point, I encountered this museum display in a regional city museum, and all of a sudden something clicked and so I started to collect photographs of similar displays from a number of museums, and try to reconstruct them in my studio. This is how the images and sculptures came about. There was something about these cultural artefacts in these museums that seemed to relate to how these five narratives of four figures came together, so I decided to put them side by side and see what happens.

EK: *Book of Facts* is your most recent work in the exhibition. It is both an artwork and a piece of literature and it seems to draw together many of the themes of the exhibition; the formation of knowledge, collective understanding, the political and social structures that we live within. Could you talk about the process of making the book?

II: I imagine the book as being documentation of an exhibition that didn't take place. All the facts are based on documents - mostly photographs or illustrations - so mainly visual material. Recently I've had this feeling that things from very disparate fields or disparate places seem to connect in strange ways and I've been trying to collect these moments to understand how they might connect.

The documents come from readings in science, mythology, religion, the birth of various modern structures such as the army, the economy, the legal system among other things. I think of the book as a thematic exhibition where the theme is not necessarily named, but where a grouping of certain elements together can allow a form of understanding to emerge or a proposition to start to take shape.