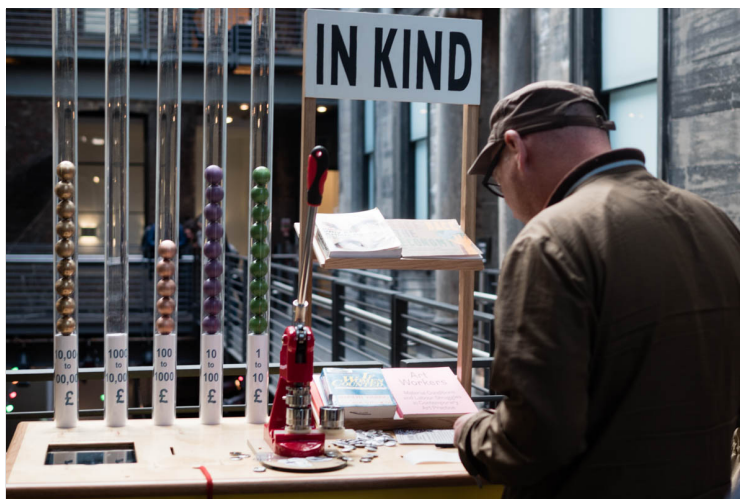


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IN KIND AND OUT OF POCKET: THE HIDDEN COSTS OF ARTISTS WORKING FOR FREE

[\(https://www.a-n.co.uk/media/52530921/\)](https://www.a-n.co.uk/media/52530921/)

31 May 18

## In Kind and out of pocket: the hidden costs of artists working for free

During this year's Glasgow International, artists Ailie Rutherford and Janie Nicoll presented In Kind, an action research project using the festival as a case study in order to chart the "hidden economies of the visual arts". Fellow Glasgow-based artist Jessica Ramm finds out what they discovered and ponders where to go next.

[Glasgow](#) [Glasgow International 2018](#) [Paying Artists](#)  
[Payment in kind](#) [roty\\_may2018](#) [Scotland](#)

Ailie Rutherford (<http://www.ailierutherford.com>) is having a busy day. From the moment she enters the room she speaks with urgency, running one sentence into the next, barely pausing for breath. Janie Nicoll (<http://www.janienicoll.co.uk>) is softly spoken, but just as passionate about her work. Until last year she was president of the Scottish Artists Union (<https://www.artistsunion.scot>), a voluntary role that has shaped her approach as an artist and provided a platform for wider discussion about the issues that affect artists at work.

Together, the pair have been working on In Kind (<https://inkindproject.info>), which Nicoll describes as "an action research project that uses Glasgow International (<http://glasgowinternational.org>) as a case study in order to



Jessica Ramm  
(<https://www.a-n.co.uk/person/jessica-ramm/>)

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chart the hidden economies of the visual arts". The project developed organically from conversations with artists who participated in the 2016 Glasgow International festival.

As Nicoll and Rutherford talk about their shared passion for both activism and art, and the difficulties of being paid for these types of work, they are surrounded by objects they have made that represent numerous unpaid hours – not just their own, but all the artists who participated in In Kind by logging their unpaid hours on a digital database. A large ball of red twine is balanced on a chair and a bar chart made out of table tennis balls sits on top of a hand-cart, which they wheeled between the conferences and soapbox events they delivered across the city during GI.

It has been a time of intense conversations and long hours for both artists. Over 50 people contributed to their data analysis, which is enough to act as a representative sample of the total number of people who participated in GI, in theory at least. Using estimates to calculate totals, they price the unpaid labour provided by artists as being worth £1.6 million, which – according to statistics provided by GI – is the same amount of money that is brought into the city in revenue during the festival.

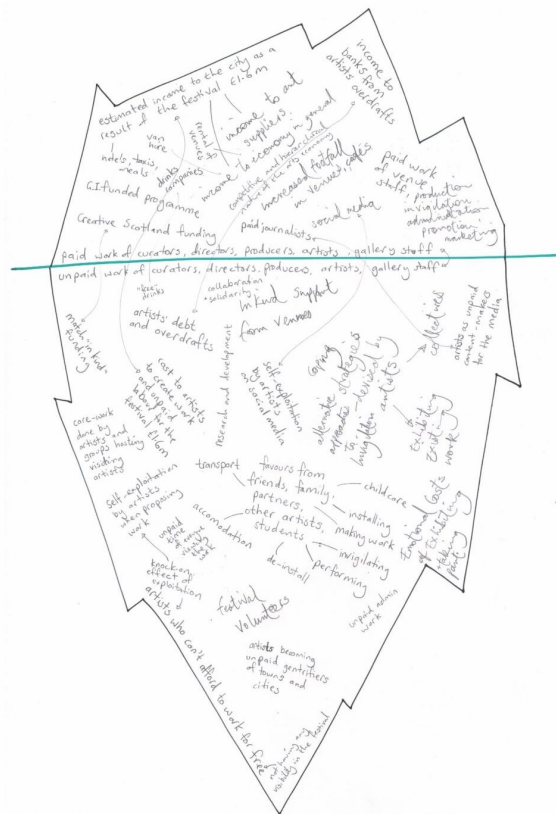


(<https://www.a-n.co.uk/media/52530922/>)

For Rutherford, who has developed her ideas about alternative economics through previous projects such as The People's Bank of Govanhill (<https://thepeoplesbankofgovanhill.wordpress.com>), it comes as no surprise how little of this revenue trickles down into artists' pockets. She references feminist economist J. K. Gibson-Graham ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J.\\_K.\\_Gibson-Graham](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._K._Gibson-Graham))'s concept of the economy as an iceberg, which illustrates "the absurd way the capitalist economy operates" since so much of the labour required to sustain it lies invisible below the waterline.

This raises two urgent questions: "How do we try and make a better case for remuneration of people who are currently practicing as artists?" and "Who does this culture of unpaid labour exclude from being an artist?" Rutherford cites Panic! (<https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/new-study-highlights-creative-sectors-exclusion-working-class-women-bame-workers/>), a recently published survey that reveals an endemic lack of social mobility across the creative sector. She adds: "Obviously, the only people who really believed it's a meritocracy were white middle-class men who are in top jobs."

For Rutherford, instigating change requires collective action, and since artists often operate as individuals “we’re not really thinking collectively as a workforce”. Again and again artists have confided in Nicoll and Rutherford about their GI experiences, sharing anecdotes of strained friendships, favours that overstep the mark, emotional burnout and, in extreme cases, artists taking out overdrafts to produce their self-funded shows.



Above: Art Economy As An Iceberg – click into the image and then click 'More info' to read in full

Having expended a lot of energy during this year's GI, both artists now need some time to consider the statistics they've gathered and to work out **VIEW BEST TO MAKE USE** of them. In the meantime they offer various potential solutions. These include campaigning for a basic citizen's income and that artists carefully scrutinize their own ethics and responsibilities towards the communities they practice within.

According to Rutherford: “A lot of people who work in the arts consider themselves to be very socially minded, very left wing, but actually as an industry we’re one of the most exclusive and elitist in the UK.” Her concern is that self-exploitation leads to the exploitation of others, and that the culture of unpaid labour this perpetuates excludes certain voices from being heard. In

Rutherford's experience: "If you're coming from a place that's precarious to begin with, you're much less likely to enter a precarious workforce."

Through In Kind, Nicoll and Rutherford have identified that there is a problem. How to tackle this problem effectively is a bigger challenge. Since 2001 the Scottish Artists Union has made good progress in providing support and information that artists can make practical use of, propelled by their core belief that artists have 'the right to a decent living wage comparable to other well-trained and educated professionals.'

In certain circumstances this comparison can help artists, but it has limitations. Many of the strategies Nicoll and Rutherford are currently discussing require artists to withdraw their labour, but they are aware this would need an unprecedented consensus to be reached within the community; and that this is particularly difficult when artists are "willing to self-exploit to get the exhibition, the opportunity".

The underlying idea that artists trample on each other to get ahead resonates with deep-rooted fears that most artists are likely to have. Everybody is compromised to varying degrees, either by having an education, time, money, ambition or some other resource that can be dedicated to making work.

Rutherford states: "If you don't think there's a problem, you're part of the problem." It's a comment that is probably intended to galvanise support for the cause but doesn't invite cooperation between artists; instead it divides them into those who have been given opportunities and those who haven't.

If being able to take your mind off the problem for long enough to make work is a privilege, how can artists justify the compromises required to protect the few spaces in which creative and joyful experimentation happens? Morale is crucial. It enables artists to keep working, whether at the margins or at the centre of the art establishment. Constructive criticism is helpful, interesting and valid, but when it's an opportunity to vent rage it fails to be productive.



(<https://www.a-n.co.uk/media/52530923/>)

Rutherford describes In Kind as "opening up a can of worms", explaining that her discussions with artists have aired such a wide range of concerns about how power and visibility are unfairly divided across the artistic community. For GI, the discussion and debate surrounding In Kind has so far been hosted by Glasgow arts organisations such as Platform (<http://www.platform-online.co.uk>) and CCA (<http://www.cca-glasgow.com/programme>). Perhaps expanding this discussion

into forums beyond the artistic community might gather more support from artists by focusing the debate into practical aims and objectives rather than a collection of aired grievances.

Rutherford's question, "Who pays for this extra work?" is a sticking point, but as an artist who is passionate about civic activism and the potential for positive change through democracy, she is more equipped than many to make use of the political channels that are available. For many of the artists who contributed to In Kind during GI, it's the first time they've calculated the unpaid hours they've worked. And that is a valuable gift in itself.

***More on In Kind at [inkindproject.info](https://inkindproject.info)  
(<https://inkindproject.info>)***

***For information on a-n's Paying Artists campaign, which aims to secure payment for artists who exhibit in publicly-funded galleries, visit [www.payingartists.org.uk](http://www.payingartists.org.uk)  
(<http://www.payingartists.org.uk>)***

**Images:**

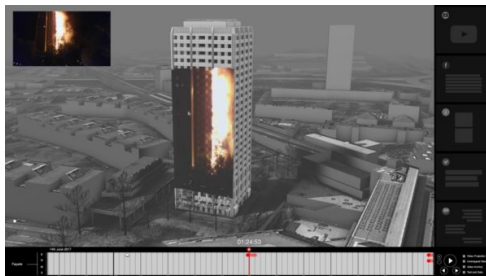
1. In Kind opening, CCA, Glasgow, April 2018. Photo: Bob Moyler; Courtesy: Janie Nicoll and Ailie Rutherford
2. In Kind Soapbox event during Glasgow International 2018. Photo: Bob Moyler; Courtesy: Janie Nicoll and Ailie Rutherford
3. Art Economy As An Iceberg, by Janie Nicoll and Ailie Rutherford for In Kind. Photo: Bob Moyler; Courtesy: Janie Nicoll and Ailie Rutherford
4. In Kind event, Platform, Glasgow, April 2018. Photo: Bob Moyler; Courtesy: Janie Nicoll and Ailie Rutherford

## **a-n Writer Development Programme**

**(<https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/n-writer-development-programme-2017-18>)**

Jessica Ramm (<http://www.jessicaramm.com/>) is a Glasgow-based artist and one of eight a-n members selected for the a-n Writer Development Programme 2017-18. For more information on the writer programme, and to read more of the latest cohort's work, visit the 2017-18 programme's blog on a-n.co.uk (<https://www.a-n.co.uk/blogs/n-writer-development-programme-2017-18>) or use the a-n writer development programme 2017-18 tag (<https://www.a-n.co.uk/tag/a-n-writer-development-programme-2017-18>)

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(<https://www.a-n.co.uk/news/qa-simone-rowat-forensic-architecture/>)