

## THE CANARIES DID NOT SING – SITE PROJECT 2014

Rob Haultain

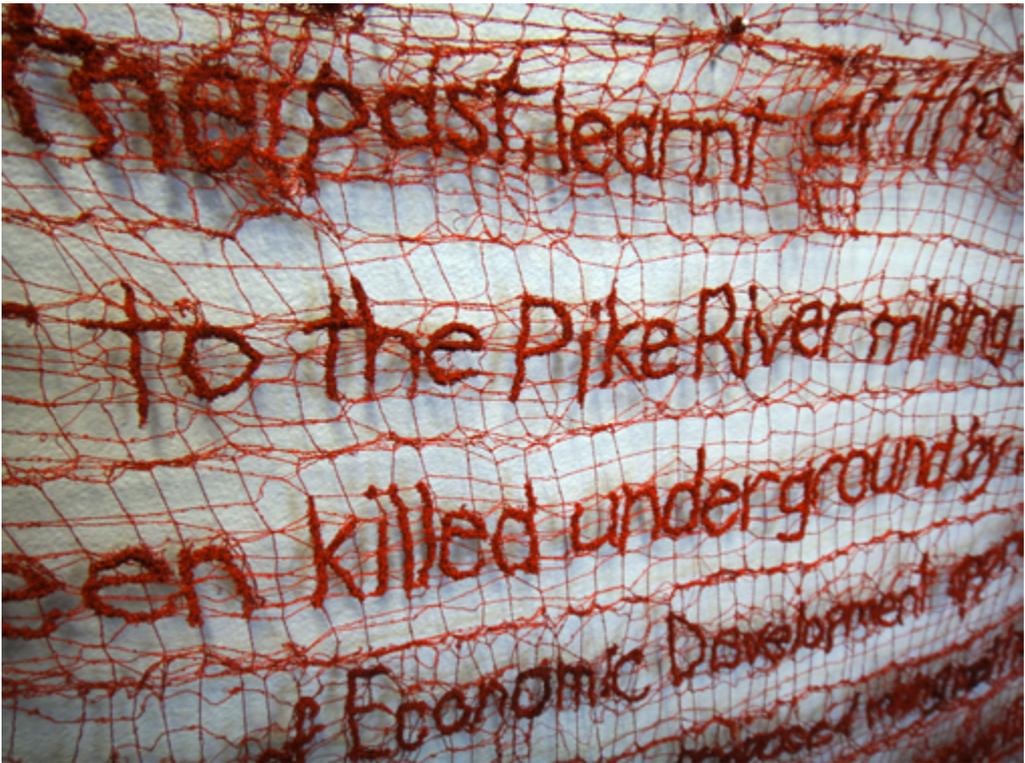


Figure 1. Rob Haultain *Pike River*, detail image, 2014.

I am a textile artist.

My practice is textiles-based for many of the same reasons that other artists work in textiles – it signifies so much that is to do with human-ness, birth, death, and everything in between. As Mildred Constantine and Laurel Reuter say in the introduction to their book *Whole Cloth*, “Cloth, that old silent companion of the human race ...”<sup>1</sup>

The American artist Ann Hamilton says of textiles, “I love textiles. They are the first house of the body – the body’s first extension – I can see now that all the metaphors of cloth as a membrane and skin, cloth as a process, underlay my work into the present. I grew up sewing.”<sup>2</sup>

My textiles-based project for the Dunedin School of Art’s “SITE 2014” graduating student exhibition had the overall title of *The Canaries did not Sing* and was composed of three pieces subtitled *Unacceptable Risks x 29*, *Lessons Learned*, and *Life Drawing*.

The work is about the Pike River Mine disaster of 2010. As most adults in New Zealand will be aware, the Pike River coal mine exploded on 19 November 2010. There were 31 men working inside the mine when it blew up. A few hours after the first explosion, two miners staggered out of the mine tunnel entrance, the only men to survive the explosion. The remains of the 29 men who were killed have never been recovered from the mine.

In making this work, I drew extensively on the excellent account of the disaster in Rebecca Macfie's book, *Tragedy at Pike River Mine*,<sup>3</sup> and I also used the Report of the Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy.<sup>4</sup>

The three parts of *The Canaries did not Sing* represent my attempt to materialise and document some of the facts of the Pike River Mine story. The overall title is a reference to the fact that in times past caged canaries were kept in coal mines as a methane warning device. If the canary died, that meant that the methane gases in the mine had risen to a dangerous level and that the miners should get out immediately. The Royal Commission found that:

There were numerous warnings of a potential catastrophe at Pike River. One source of these was the reports made by the underground deputies and workers. For months they had reported incidents of excess methane (and many other health and safety problems). In the last 48 days before the explosion there were 21 reports of methane levels reaching explosive volumes, and 27 reports of lesser, but potentially dangerous, volumes. The reports of excess methane continued up to the very morning of the tragedy. The warnings were not heeded.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Rob Haultain, *Unacceptable Risks x 29*, 2014.

*Unacceptable Risks x 29* (Figure 2) comprises 29 hard hats made of molded gauze and hung in the same configuration as the identification tags of the 29 mine workers who were killed in the explosion were hung on the 'tag board' at Pike River Mine. Before a mine worker entered the mine he was required to place an identification tag on the board so that those above ground knew who was working underground. The work is all white.

My intention in this piece was to create an air of silent reproach, in much the same way as the Colombian artist Doris Salcedo does in much of her work.<sup>6</sup>

I made the hard hats (an emblem of safety gear) from gauze as a comment on the fragility and futility of a health and safety regime that was barely monitored by the government agency responsible, and that was able to be treated as an optional extra that the mine owners complied with on paper only. After reading Macfie's book and the Report of the Royal Commission, I came to the view that the doomed miners might have been wearing either the most sophisticated protective gear ever invented or no protective gear at all – the outcome would have been the same. Safety was never considered a priority by any decision-maker associated with the mine, thus making the fatal explosion inevitable. The Royal Commission stated: "In the drive towards coal production the directors and executive managers paid insufficient attention to health and safety and exposed the company's workers to unacceptable risks."<sup>7</sup>



Figures 3a & 3b. Rob Haultain, *Lessons Learned*, detail and stitching process, 2014.

*Lessons Learned* (Figures 1 & 3) is made of red viscose thread (4m x 1200mm) which was first worked on disposable hospital laundry bags, which function as an infection control device. Infectious laundry is placed in the bags which dissolve when in contact with hot water and ensures that only one staff member handles the soiled washing. The work is made up of statements taken from the Royal Commission's report, with a few from Macfie's book. I stitched the statements in lines of text onto the laundry bags, joined each line together, and then washed away the health and safety device.

The Royal Commission referred to the "lessons" to be learned from the disaster on a number of occasions: "This, sadly, is the 12th commission of inquiry into coal mining disasters in New Zealand. This suggests that as a country we fail to learn from the past."<sup>8</sup>

The lessons from the Pike River tragedy must not be forgotten. New Zealand needs to make urgent legislative, structural and attitudinal changes if future tragedies are to be avoided. Government, industry and workers need to work together. That would be the best way to show respect for the 29 men who never returned home on 19 November 2010, and for their loved ones who continue to suffer.<sup>9</sup>

The Pike River tragedy contains lessons for government, regulators, employers and workers, especially in high-hazard industries such as coal mining, where the frequency of major accidents is low, but accidents can have catastrophic results.<sup>10</sup>

The use of the term "lesson" made me think of old cross-stitched samplers which functioned in part as a means of teaching life lessons by the careful stitching of, say, a verse from the Bible or a proverb or popular maxim. This work was generally carried out by girls and young women.<sup>11</sup> In stitching out these statements, I chose to name Peter Whittall and New Zealand Oil & Gas because they were among the parties which had the power to make

decisions that could have saved the lives of all 29 men. The work is in a shade of red called Dynamite Red, chosen from a Resene paint chart. This colour has obvious associations with blood and also with ideas of solidarity – for example, the workers' song *The Red Flag*. I also wanted to reference the idea of a net (for safety?) and also net curtains. In so doing, I wanted to encourage viewers to think of the home and notions of domesticity as a means of reminding us that every person who dies at work comes from a home and has people who love them and care about them.

I have come to think of this piece as both the 'vale' and the 'veil' – 'a vale of tears' and a veil in the legal sense of the 'corporate veil'. This is an old, yet nifty, legal invention that states that in the case of a limited liability company, the courts can only deal with the company as a corporate entity, and thus may rarely 'pierce the corporate veil' to bring individual actors to account. All very *Wizard of Oz!* Despite a judge finding Pike River Coal Ltd (in receivership) guilty of nine breaches of the Health and Safety in Employment Act on 18 April 2013, and describing the disaster as the "health and safety event of this generation ... a worse case is hard to imagine,"<sup>12</sup> no individual has been held accountable and the true owners of the company, New Zealand Oil & Gas, have escaped prosecution and any liability. In addition, they are still able to take advantage of the tax concessions the government provides to oil exploration companies and in 2015 are trading very profitably.



Figures 4. Rob Hautain, *Lessons Learned* installation view, 2014.

So, have the people who needed to learn these lessons learnt anything at all?

*Life Drawing* (Fig 5) is the third part of the work. It consisted of the phrase "An injury to one is an injury to many" handwritten in coal dust on the floor between the other two pieces. Because I knew that this part of the work would be walked over, I hoped that fragments of my coal-dust message would be taken away by all who viewed the work. Although the phrase I used conventionally reads "an injury to one is an injury to all," I avoided that wording because some people – like Peter Whittall – appeared to have walked away from the debacle that was Pike River Coal Mine Ltd with barely a scratch, while the mining families have been deeply and irrevocably wounded.

Despite the Royal Commission's strong recommendations (see above), I do not believe that the lessons they urged to keep workers safe have yet been learned. Recently, reforms to health and safety legislation in New Zealand have been 'parked' by the government because of concerns raised by backbench MPs, who have been lobbied by farmers, forestry operators, quarry operators and so on, anxious to avoid what they characterise as too much red tape.<sup>13</sup> This is hardly consistent with the Royal Commission's recommendation that reforming the legislation would be the best way of showing respect to the Pike 29 and their loved ones.

Most of all, I made this work because I want viewers to think about the wrongful actions of Pike River Coal Mine Ltd, to conclude that what happened was scandalous, and to take whatever action they can to tell the current government that such a tragedy must never happen again.

My hopes for my work are expressed perfectly by American textile artist, Deborah Fisher: "I make work for you,

that one individual, with the small hope that it will reach out with a dangerous yet delicate touch to move you. I want to make objects that make you feel something in your gut, in your heart. I want to magnify and expound what is beautiful, what is painful, what is aching, what is magical!"<sup>14</sup>

I am a beginning artist so it is way too soon to know if my work can achieve that intention, but this is where I want to go with my work.

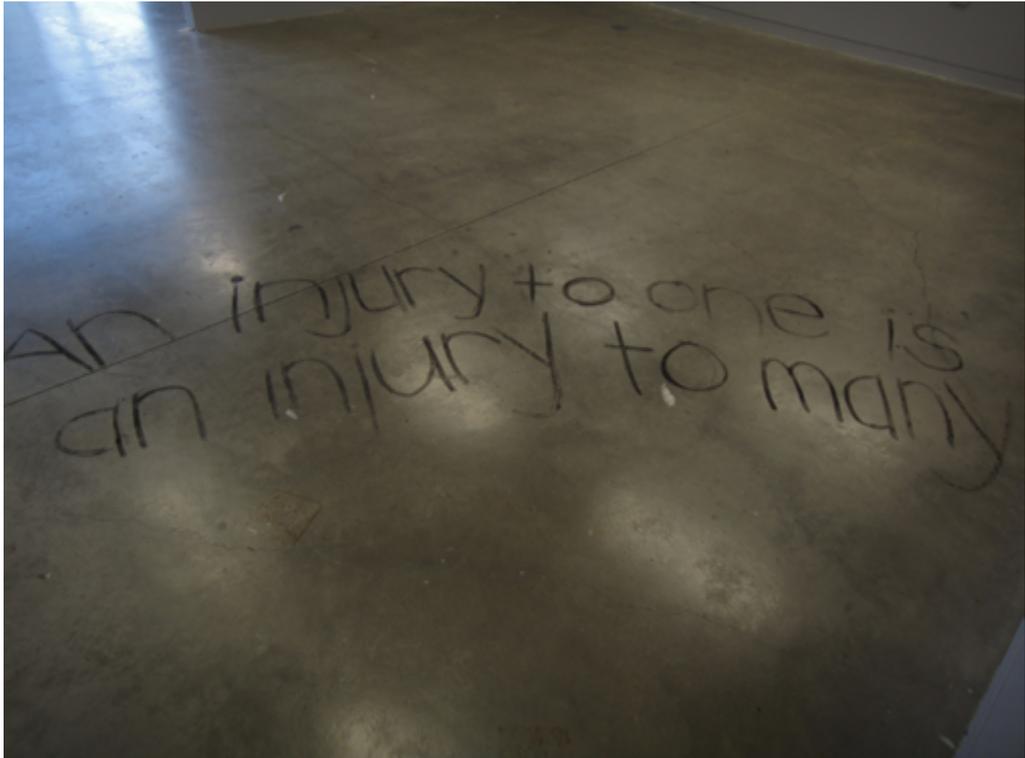


Figure 5. Rob Haultain, *Life Drawing*, 2014. Photo by Pam McKinlay.

**Rob Haultain** came to the Dunedin School of Art in 2013 as an adult student to complete a Graduate Diploma. Prior to that, she had worked in and around the trade union movement as an employment lawyer and industrial advocate. This experience, along with her beliefs about social justice and the role of art as a means of promoting it, informs her art practice.

- 1 M Constantine and L Reuter, *Whole Cloth* (New York: Monacelli Press, 1997), 9.
- 2 Amei Wallach, "A Conversation with Ann Hamilton in Ohio," *American Art*, 22:1 (Spring 2008), 52-77, at 73.
- 3 Rebecca Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike River Mine* (Wellington: Awa Press, 2013).
- 4 *Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy* (Wellington: Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy, 2012).
- 5 *Ibid.*, 12.
- 6 See, for example, her work *Untitled* (1989-93), which consists of piles of folded white shirts which have been plastered solid and pierced by metal poles. This work refers to the murder of 40 male banana plantation workers. See Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, *Doris Salcedo – Feb 21 – May 24, 2015*, <https://www2.mcachicago.org/exhibition/doris-salcedo> [accessed 17 May 2015].
- 7 *Royal Commission on the Pike River Coal Mine Tragedy*, 12.

8 Ibid, 3.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid, 29.

11 See the discussion of the role of the sampler in Roszika Parker, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine* (London: IB Taurus, 2010).

12 Macfie, *Tragedy at Pike River Mine*, 239.

13 "Judith Collins Says Historic Health and Safety Bill Needs 'Tweaking,'" *One News*, 27 May 2015, <https://www.tvnz.co.nz/one-news/new-zealand/judith-collins-says-historic-health-and-safety-bill-needs-tweaking-6322757> [accessed 27 May 2015].

14 See *Art Textiles of the World: USA*, vol. 1, ed. Matthew Koumis (Winchester, England: Telos Art Publishing, 2000), 68.