

# Private Vocabulary

Riitta Päiväläinen's work could be defined as archaeology of the ordinary.

Using old clothes found in second-hand shops and in flea markets, she creates installations in natural settings that she then photographs.

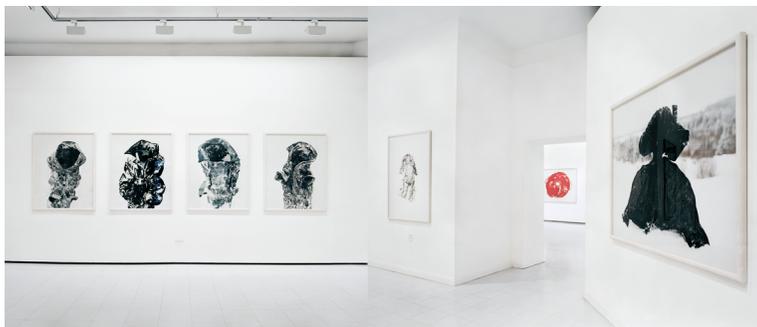
## Words

Words are important in Riitta Päiväläinen's work. She explains that while working, she constantly repeats certain words in her mind. Words accompany her, guide her, inspire her, and help her to understand what she is looking for.

In collecting words, Päiväläinen creates her own 'private vocabulary'. These words are the very foundation of her photographs.

## Clothing

For Riitta Päiväläinen clothes are the vestiges of human beings, symbolising a person's history which, in absence of the person, impregnates the discarded garments. Old and used garments therefore represent both the presence and the absence of their former owners.



Gallery Artina  
Helsinki, Finland, 2002

## Landscape

The landscape is not a topographical and objective phenomenon; it is highly evocative and subjective. The landscape represents the cycle of life; of birth and death. In her installations Päiväläinen uses the landscape as a stage or a setting in which she displays the clothing for her photographs.

## Photography

Riitta Päiväläinen's photographs are documents of the encounters between clothing and landscapes. She condenses the sculptural qualities of her installations onto the two-dimensional surfaces of her photographs. Her mises en scène exist only to be photographed.

Each of her installations, with a 'setting' (the landscapes), 'actors' (clothing), and 'atmosphere' (light), is carefully prepared. However, in working in natural environments, Päiväläinen is also open to the accidental, the unforeseen, and surprise. By using the photograph instead of the installation as the final work of art, Päiväläinen is able to choose the exact frame and moment she is looking for and in so doing, maintains control over the decision as to what she includes and what she leaves out.

Another important component in Päiväläinen's photographic approach is the notion of evidence. She uses the viewer's likely perception of photographic images—as copies, records, or documents of reality—in order to give substance to her 'imaginary histories'. In her pictures she creates worlds in which reality and authenticity are closely intertwined with her own fictions.

## Memory, past, unwritten and imaginary history

The word 'memory' is very precious to Riitta Päiväläinen, and is essential to her work.

While visiting second-hand shops, she often reflects on how much we forget and how many people are forgotten in 'The Great History'. We are used to remem-

bering and celebrating the lives and achievements of the famous, who are contemporaries of millions of nobodies—people who lived and died without leaving any detailed information, or facts about themselves, to the following generations.

The clothes in her photographs are the evidence of this past; they symbolise these 'unknown' people. Päiväläinen's pictures suggest the loss of memory and provide us with a parallel and very personal approach to history which, in her case, is treated creatively and does not pretend to provide the viewer with factuality.

### Vestige

Of Latin origin, the word vestigium has many different meanings: footstep, footprint, trace, track, a faint mark or visible sign left by something which is lost, or has perished, or is no longer present; remains, as in the vestiges of an ancient city, or vestiges of a former population.

Vestige is the name of Riitta Päiväläinen's first body of work. This first series, photographed in black and white, was begun in 1998 while Päiväläinen was still a student at the University of Art and Design in Helsinki.



The Brewery Arts Centre  
Kendal, England, 2001

What is remarkable about this series is that not only are the various elements which Päiväläinen has since used in her work already present, but also, her incredible gift of theatricality, which she uses to integrate the garments into the landscape, is already very developed.

Closely followed in 1999 by a new series with the same title, but this time in color, the second Vestige series slightly differs from the previous one in that the photographed clothes clearly show traces of alteration caused by time and/or natural elements. The process of aging, altering and vanishing seems to be the central theme of this body of work.

Having realised that Vestige was not only a relevant title for her first two series, but also for her future work, Päiväläinen decided to use the word as the main title for all of the work she has since produced and under which she continues to group all of her different series of photographs.

### **Ice**

Ice, which was begun in 2000, was Riitta Päiväläinen's first serious experimentations with frozen clothing. Soaked in water and placed outside in freezing weather, the empty and unshapely garments suddenly become sculptural and almost alive.

When the garments freeze, they can be shaped in postures as if animated by an invisible body. Frozen, the clothes become independent and objectified. They can be placed in the landscape as individuals or in groups, in the same way one portrays people.

Working with frozen clothes is, however, logistically difficult. Päiväläinen needs special weather conditions: the temperature has to be low enough for the clothing to freeze and the daylight must be bright enough to show details, but to avoid shadows there cannot be direct sunshine. The combination of these requirements, coupled with the geographic location in which she lives and works, mean the artist can only produce these pictures during a short period of the year.

### **Wind**

After finishing the Ice series, Riitta Päiväläinen explored new ways of animating the clothes. In the wind, another natural element, she found a new ally which, though more unpredictable than the cold, was also more fascinating.

Ice, with its pure white snowy backgrounds, brings out the strong shape of each single garment. In Wind, the landscape is predominant. Once again, Päiväläinen focuses more on the idea of the installation and the concept of space and place than on the individual article of clothing.

The Wind series features pictures of Finnish and English landscapes which, depending on the number and the kinds of garments used, become the settings for gatherings of different kinds. Wind brings the clothes alive, plays with them, shakes them, directs them, or abandons them. Wind is their source of energy, their driving force; their master.

### **Steps**

Steps is a series produced in 2003. Päiväläinen was asked to participate in an exhibition at the Vantaa Art Museum, entitled Ordinary Everyday. She decided to do so by creating a whole new body of work, this time using old socks which she had found in the attic of an abandoned house. As in her earlier works, Päiväläinen sees the socks as vestiges of people who have passed away—people whose presence is symbolised by their ordinary belongings.

In the exhibition, the photographs of the socks, hung quite closely together, were arranged in a long row on the wall. Päiväläinen was interested in the rhythm that was created by the succession of images of the socks, as well as in the alternation between the photographs and the empty wall spaces.

To break the repetitive rhythm, Päiväläinen added pictures of children's stockings which she had found in various second-hand shops. The stockings are arranged in circles and presented in round-shaped prints. Their strong colors, as well as their shapes and movement, add cheeriness to the monochromatic prints of the socks.



Kuopio Art Museum  
 Kuopio, Finland, 2006  
 Photo: Hannu Miettinen

### Aomori, Blue Forest

During the summer of 2004 Päiväläinen visited Aomori, a city situated at the north end of the island Honshū. As in Finland, she went to the local second-hand shops to buy dresses and garments. The challenge for her was to find out how her work would evolve in these new landscapes with these different articles.

In creating her works, as well as in installing the kimonos in the Japanese landscape, Päiväläinen at first followed her previous working method. However, the style of clothing, with their geometric forms and strong cultural and traditional connotations, give these series a feeling very different to that of her previous work.

Later on, Päiväläinen developed a new approach in which she separated the obi belts from the kimonos and used them independently. The obis are used like ropes which, winding themselves around the trees and through the woods, create a linear labyrinth. Formally interesting, the colorful lines, placed in the dark forest, also take on a symbolic dimension—like Ariadne’s thread, they seem to show a way out, but in reality they lead to nowhere in particular.

### Structura

The first images for *Structura* were created in 2004.

Most of the images of the series were produced in the remote, silent and virtually uninhabited landscapes of Lapland, where Päiväläinen spent three months. The words, ‘shelter’ and ‘gathering’, which accompanied her are at the heart of this series of photographs, and were inspired by the ancient spiritual and social meetings of the people of Lapland.

For *Structura* Päiväläinen used clothing to create different types of shelters. The natural settings she worked within look haunted, void of any human activity. The shelters address this absence and evoke a sense of past presence. As in some of her previous images, the influence of Jorma Puranen’s work is perceptible, especially his series *Imaginary Homecoming* in which Puranen worked on the history of Lapland, symbolically evoking Lapland’s autochthonous peoples. However, Päiväläinen’s approach is different. It is based on a concept of imaginary history. She suggests a scenario, an imaginary tale not inspired by reality but which, instead, echoes her own ideas of unwritten and forgotten history.

### Imaginary Meeting

Another word in Riitta Päiväläinen’s private vocabulary is ‘meeting’.

Once more Päiväläinen takes an element from an earlier series and uses it in a novel manner. In *Imaginary Meeting* she again uses the cold but, focusing on isolated

pieces of clothing, Päiväläinen experiments this time with animating the garments in such a way as to lend them a sense of individuality and give them 'personalities'.

This series is done with the previously mentioned obis, kimono belts which Päiväläinen had discovered a couple of years earlier in Japan.

The first image she created is called 'Spine'. For many years Päiväläinen had been searching for an image to represent the family tree. 'Spine' shows a number of male kimonos, each bearing its own coat of arms or family crest, intimately intertwined and frozen together. Once Päiväläinen had produced the image, she realized that she had finally created the image of familial interconnectivity that she had been looking for.

Less symbolic than the first image, the rest of the series of Japanese obis is named after flowers. These obi flowers, which have no reference to western clothing or to human presence, are formally more abstract than the Ice portraits. With the long belts Päiväläinen creates forms which are materialised by the voids of the snow-white backgrounds as much as they are by the colourful volume of the textiles.

### Camouflage

Camouflage is Päiväläinen's latest series, which she started in 2005 and on which she is currently working.

Looking back at all of her work one can clearly see that Päiväläinen, while constantly moving back and forth, is steadily advancing.

Päiväläinen is interested in the growth of ideas, in the process that leads from one thought to the next. In Camouflage Päiväläinen again develops earlier ideas to uncover a new form of expression. She does not plan out her work or her ideas; one thing leads her to the next.

Compared to her previous work, the garments in Camouflage, as the title already suggests, are more integrated into the landscape; they aren't prominent. The clothes, by their color and form, merge into the natural settings. 'Shelter', 'hideaway',



Gallery Hippolyte  
Helsinki, Finland, 1999  
Photo: Ari Saarto

'presence' and 'absence' are the key words, central to this idea of 'melting into the landscape'.

In her latest interview Päiväläinen confessed, 'I often feel one with the landscape, it is actually very vital to me. Maybe this series has in fact to do with my personal feelings; I feel very close to nature; nature feels home to me'.

*Andréa Holzherr*