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The Emergence of Photographic Collecting as Knowledge Accumulation: ‘Latvian Types’ by Jānis Krēsliņš (1865 - ?)

This research explores the beginnings of photographic collecting practices of the Riga Latvian Society (*Rīgas Latviešu Biedrība*, RLB), the core organization of the Latvian National Movement. I focus my analysis on the production contexts of the “Latvian Types” by Jānis Krēsliņš (1865 - ?), the photographic survey commissioned by the RLB in 1893, taken during 1894 and 1895 and, finally, exhibited at the Latvian Ethnographic Exhibition of 1896.¹ However, the origins of the Jānis Krēsliņš’ photographic endeavour draws its roots beyond the time frame of the production and engages not only the photographer and his subjects – a group of Latvian peasants -, but also a rich diversity of actors and institutions. Moreover, the initial impulses for this photographic survey can be drawn farther the spatial dimension of its production and consumption. Resulting portraits materialize the temporal and spatial uncertainties emerging as an ambiguous process of knowledge accumulation in photographs. The photographic survey looks at the Latvian population - mostly portraits of the rural Latvians – covering the Baltic Provinces and the Province of Vitebsk in the Russian Empire. In photographs, the majority of individuals, usually one per picture, are represented in a straightforward manner, placed centrally in the frame, gazing into the lens (see figure above). Taking up the concept by Elizabeth Edwards and Christopher Morton, ‘photographs are increasingly being understood as knowledge-objects in their own right,’ I want to examine the Jānis Krēsliņš’ photographs as key site of miscellaneous engagements, the photographic objects fostering the dominant forms of visual and material knowledge. Accepting photographs as knowledge absorbents and transferers, an effect of their instrumental understanding is of importance. The idea of this paper is therefore to explore in retrospect and understand the generation of the knowledge ascribed to these photographs. The aim is to

¹ The National History Museum of Latvia houses the significant holdings of Jānis Krēsliņš (1865 - ?) –among them are 297 photographs and 79 drawings, watercolours and oil paintings.

examine the instrumentalization of photographic knowledge and its various forms of strategies exploited within an emerging anthropological science.

At the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the photography was acclaimed as distinctively scientific medium. Still as the new technology, the photography immediately attracted the scientific circles and was highly exploited at the production and collecting of visual knowledge. At the time, the automatism of the photographic process promised to “copy the nature” which was the perfect technique to gather observable, empirical and measurable information. Henceforth, the authority of photography as evidence was utilized ‘to establish anthropological fact.’ By the 1890s photography was already quite widely applied to anthropological documentations all around the world. Likewise, anthropology as the modern enterprise was a perfect instrument to distinguish the Latvian national ‘types’ among the Baltic multicultural society in the nineteenth century. The Jānis Krēsliņš’ survey demonstrated, “Latvians” as objects of anthropological typologization through the act of scientific image-making. The study follows the implication of these two disciplinary histories – anthropology and photography – shaping the Latvian national heritage in the late nineteenth century.