

REGEN PROJECTS

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ARTFORUM

CRITICS' PICKS



View of Willem de Rooij's *Pierre Verger in Suriname*, 2021.

FRANKFURT

Willem de Rooij

PORTIKUS

Alte Brücke 2 / Maininsel

March 27–July 17, 2021

In this compact but extraordinarily layered exhibition, Willem de Rooij poses unresolvable questions regarding the ethics and efficacy of appropriation, an art-historical tradition that has long informed the Dutch artist's own

practice. An adagio-paced carousel of black-and-white photographs is projected onto an imposingly minimal one-way mirror. These 257 images were made by Pierre Verger—photojournalist, self-taught anthropologist, and initiate of the Candomblé religion—during an eight-day trip to Suriname in 1948. Shipped back to his native Paris to be archived by his mentor and associate Pierre Boucher at the ADEP photo agency, the pictures eventually arrived at Verger's adoptive city of Salvador de Bahia, Brazil, where a local publisher, *Corrupio*, expressed interest. De Rooij presents the photographs in the thematic order Verger conceived in 1982—"Hindu," "Marche," "Rues," "Whanhatti," "Kromanti"—leaving us to surmise the purposes for which they were made, be they editorial or ethnographic. The photographs show dwellers strolling among colonial villas; historical re-enactments of indentured Indian workers being brought to Suriname by the Dutch; pullulating street markets; rarely seen ritual night dances. Verger's long and complex engagement with the African-Brazilian diaspora—which led him to receive a doctoral degree at the Sorbonne on one hand, and to become a spiritual ambassador between Bahia and Yorubaland in West Africa on the other—is reflected in the pictures. We watch him watching Suriname and, thanks to the generous pause de Rooij leaves between the images, we see ourselves watching, too.

— *Francesco Tenaglia*