

ARTIST'S GUIDE TO FESTIVAL DISTRIBUTION

AV-ARKKI
CENTRE FOR
FINNISH MEDIA ART

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Festival Distribution: The Basics	3
When Your Film Is Nearing Completion	4
What Your Promotional Materials Should Include	6
Still Photos	6
Poster	6
Synopsis and logline	7
Other informations and credits	8
Biography	9
Filmography	9
Press Kit or Productions Notes	10
Translations and Subtitles	11
Your Film Is Selected for a Festival – What Next	12
What to Do When Attending a Festival	14
Beyond Festivals: What Other Options for Distribution There Are	16
Collaborating with International Sales Agents	18

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FESTIVAL DISTRIBUTION: THE BASICS

The distribution strategy is a plan that includes confirmed venues for the finished production (such as a gallery exhibition) and a list of festivals and other events with open calls where you intend to offer the work. If you have separate installation and screening versions, it is advisable to create parallel and supportive distribution strategies for them.

It is useful, even necessary, to begin planning the distribution strategy already during the production phase. Start by answering these questions:

- What are your expectations for distribution?
- Where would you like your production to be presented?
- Who is the audience for this work?
- Could you consider presenting your project in pitching events (e.g. Finnish Film Affair, Tampere Film Festival / Who Would Buy This?, Nordisk Panorama...)
- Examine the possibilities for monetising the distribution of your production. Would broadcasters such as YLE or streamers be interested in distributing it?

Distributors and festivals can already be approached with the rough cut. Keep in mind that if you submit a rough cut version for the event, you usually cannot submit the finished film the next year. One film can be submitted for a specific event only once. The lifespan of a film in festival distribution is typically two years starting from the first public screening. Only a few events want productions older than that in their repertoire, with exceptions such as thematic shows and retrospectives.

Start preparing the promotional materials already during production. You need usually the following materials for festival submissions:

- secured preview link (e.g. Vimeo)
- still photos
- synopsis
- director's portrait
- your biography and/or filmography
- technical information (production country, duration, aspect ratio, sound, screening copy)
- credits (information about the artistic crew, production and funding)
- artist's statement / director's statement: short text where you can share more insight on the background or theme of your film

WHEN YOUR FILM IS NEARING COMPLETION

Now is the time to implement the distribution strategy in practice! Approach a distributor (for example AV-arkki) and/or submit the film to festivals yourself.

Even if you have made the work originally as an installation for a gallery exhibition, also take care of possible editing and distribution of the screening version, if the production could be also suitable for festivals. Therefore, there can be two different versions of the same work with different release dates, especially if there are some modifications made to the screening version. Keep in mind that many festivals are also interested in installations, VR, AR, live, or expanded cinema.

The **release year** of the film is defined according to the first public presentation – not according to the moment when the production is finished on the artist's desk. If the gallery exhibition is at the end of the year, you should only mark the screening version's release year for the following year. If you finish the production, for example, around September or October 2025, but it will not be publicly displayed anywhere until the following year, you should mark 2026 as its publication year.

Check that all **promotional materials** are ready (see section *Promotional materials*). The purpose of the promotional materials is to first get the curator or the festival programmer interested in the film. After the film is selected for the festival programme, a good synopsis helps to arouse interest in the audience. The film also needs translations and subtitles (mainly English) if there is dialogue.

Follow your **festival strategy**:

- Are you aiming for a premiere at some specific major film festival?
- Do you prefer submitting your film from the start to several smaller events as well?
- Are there festivals that are specialised in the theme or genre of your film?
- Have your older films been selected for some festivals? Sometimes the festivals and programmers are keen to follow the filmmaker's career in the future as well.

If you are aiming for a festival that requires an international premiere, do not present the film outside the main production country in the meantime. On the other hand, you should not wait too long for the perfect premiere. It is to the advantage of the film that it is seen in a relevant context. Sometimes especially artists' moving image work might get better exposure at a smaller or mid-size festival than at a giant event.

You can find reliable and relevant festivals from, for example, AV-arkki's deadline calendar. Many festivals use online submission platforms such as **FilmFreeway**, **shortfilmdepot**, or **Festhome**. Sometimes the films are submitted through the festival's own website.

Some festivals charge a submission fee, which should be taken into account already in the production phase of your film. However, you should carefully consider which event is worth paying for. Festivals often also have more affordable *early bird deadlines* – the amount of the submission fees increases step by step as the registration deadline approaches.

Also note that especially on FilmFreeway there are unfortunately several scam film festivals. Do some background research if the event is not already known:

- Is this particular event beneficial for my film and my artistic career?
- What other films have been selected for the festival?
- Does the festival production seem professional?

Fake festivals may attract filmmakers with prizes that have no real relevance and collect submission fees out of thin air. At such festivals, the award given out every month in more than ten categories does not increase the film's credibility, rather on the contrary.

Read the festival's regulations carefully so that you know where you are submitting your film – or if you can submit it in the first place. Several festivals have different restrictions regarding, for example, the duration, the publishing year, or the genre.

WHAT YOUR PROMOTIONAL MATERIALS SHOULD INCLUDE

STILL PHOTOS

Still photos are of great importance. They are needed in all stages of the production's lifespan in distribution. Therefore, there should be at least three of them.

There should be both print-quality versions with a high resolution (at least 300 dpi) and smaller versions for the web. If you are not prepared for producing promotional photos already during the shooting of your production, you can, for lack of a better option, use a screenshot.

The still photos represent your film: they provide information about the style and world of the film to a viewer who has not seen it yet. They should also be intended to make the viewer interested in the film. Pictures from filming (*behind the scenes / making of*) can also be interesting and bring added value to the promotion of your production. They can also be used to market the film already in the production phase. However, make sure that actual still images and making of photos or the documentation photos of the installation do not mix with each other.

POSTER

The poster helps your work to stand out from the multitude of films on site at the festival, but it can also be used, for example, in social media marketing. Often the poster is sent as a print quality file to the festival or it can also be printed on site. A good poster draws attention and conveys something about the style and atmosphere of the work. However, it is important that the title of the film stands out.

SYNOPSIS AND LOGLINE

A logline consists of one, at most two sentences. It is supposed to encapsulate something essential about the film and arouse the viewer's interest.

The synopsis should communicate the most essential things of the film (theme, style) clearly stated, so that anyone can get an idea of your work. There should be two versions of the synopsis, a shorter one (about 300–500 characters) and a longer one.

If your film is narrative, summarize the starting point or premise, the main characters and the basic tension. If the work is more experimental or abstract, in addition to the theme, the synopsis can reveal, for example, the style or method used (for example, "filmed on hand-processed 16mm film" or "a camera-less film"). You can also mention, for example, philosophical, historical or social references of your work, but a synopsis should always be short, clear, and understandable.

You can ask your colleague, friend, or family member to read your synopsis and give you feedback. Check or double check the language of the synopsis in both Finnish and English.

OTHER INFORMATIONS AND CREDITS

Make sure that the information of your film is correct everywhere – errors multiply when the film is distributed to different environments.

- Is the title spelled correctly? Also check your opening credits carefully before producing a DCP copy
- Before the premiere, you can still define the release year of the film, especially if it moves to the next year. It would be good to get the release year correct in the end credits as well.
- The country of production is the country from which the work is financed. The country of production is not necessarily the same as the location of shooting. For example, if you have made your film in Paris but with Finnish funding or in a residence run by Finnish organisations, the country of production of the film is Finland, not France. If you have also received French funding for your film, France is the co-production country. If most of the funding is from Finnish sources, Finland is mentioned first.
- Is the duration correct? It will be an unpleasant surprise if the film is several minutes longer than originally announced.
- Are the names of the artistic and technical crew, producers, and funders spelled correctly and are all those who contributed essentially to the production included?

BIOGRAPHY

A biography is a brief description of the artist's professional background. Which audience your bio is aimed at? What do they need to know?

A biography is often slightly longer than the short synopsis, but not too long. An optimal length for a biography is 500–600 characters.

Details that can or should be mentioned in the biography:

- place of residence (perhaps also place of birth, if relevant)
- year of birth
- the most relevant education and/or degree
- information about your artistic praxis, medium, and methods (for example "a photographer who works also in documentary film")
- a compact description of the themes, topics, or style of your artistic work or of the questions you explore in your art
- the most important exhibitions, festival selections, and awards

Keep the list compact rather than excessive.

FILMOGRAPHY

Filmography is a list of your released films so far. It can also include installations. The films are listed in chronological order, usually the most recent work at the top and the oldest at the end. Enter the name of the work, year of the first public screening and duration, optionally also genre, format and the most important awards, if any.

PRESS KIT OR PRODUCTIONS NOTES

Film festivals often ask for a *press kit* among other deliverables. Press kit includes promotional materials and information that can be shared with the press accredited for the festival. Press kit is usually a pdf file, sometimes a print.

For a press kit, you need at least:

- basic information of the film (country or countries of production, release year, duration, genre, aspect ratio, sound)
- still photos
- synopsis
- director's portrait
- director's biography and (selected) filmography
- information about the production company (if there is one)
- contact information for festivals and sales (you can include *programme@av-arkki.fi* if the film is in AV-arkki's distribution archive)

Press kit can include even more materials or have a creative touch. You can add for example:

- additional stills and visual elements
- *behind the scenes* or *making of* photos
- director's statement
- additional information about the producer and the production company
- short interview with the director
- short interview with other talent from the crew (actor, composer, writer...)
- other relevant and interesting background information on the production

TRANSLATIONS AND SUBTITLES

The film must be comprehensible in English. English subtitles are needed, for example, for films in Finnish or other languages. Sometimes they may also be useful even if the dialogue is in English.

AV-arkki nowadays requests .srt subtitles anyway, because adding subtitles to videos increases accessibility. There are several free softwares for creating subtitles. Pay attention to the readability and correctness of the subtitles. Do not leave the font too small. A time-coded dialogue list is necessary if festivals translate the subtitles into the local language.

YOUR FILM IS SELECTED FOR A FESTIVAL – WHAT NEXT

When your film gets invited for a festival, we advise you to confirm it unless you have a fundamental reason to decline. Sometimes it is necessary to check before confirming if the film is selected for some other festival that would require a premiere. In that case, and if the inviting festival is taking place before the other festival, you would need to withdraw your film from the first event. This, however, is relatively rare. If your film is selected for a festival or other event, you can assume that the programmers are committed to presenting it.

Deliver requested materials promptly. This usually includes at least the screening copy but possibly again or a more detailed version of credits and other information, promotion materials, such as poster, still photos, synopsis, trailer, and press kit.

It is possible to apply for funding to make a DCP copy. However, pay attention to the grant application and decision schedules, especially if you have to edit the work at this stage (for example, producing a new sound mix). In some cases, the festival can produce the DCP.

After receiving an invitation to the festival or especially if your film has been selected for the competition, you can apply for travel funding to attend the festival. Funders may require the festival to provide accommodation. If your production has received funding from AVEK, you can apply for travel funding from AVEK as well. At least in the past, the Finnish Film Foundation has supported the international promotion of productions that are not supported by AVEK. Check the current situation at the International Department of the Finnish Film Foundation.

Announce the selection of your film for the festival for example in your social media accounts, but only after the publication of the official program of the festival. It is a good idea to inform AV-arkki about the selection as well and, if relevant and according to the funding status, also the Finnish Film Foundation and AVEK, possibly also Frame Contemporary Art Finland. If there is a Finnish culture institute or embassy in the area, they too can be interested in the selection and promote it on their own channels.

Remember to thank the funders. Mention also AV-arkki in your social media posts, especially if the film was submitted and/or delivered to the festival by AV-arkki – you can also forward preview requests and other inquiries following the selection to AV-arkki.

Find out when and where the screening(s) of your film take place and promote them to your contacts, especially those who have the opportunity to attend the festival. If you are attending the festival in person, you can print a moderate number of postcard-sized flyers with a poster or still image, a logline or a short synopsis, the times and venues of the screenings, as well as the distribution contact or your own contact information.

Work in cooperation with the festival's PR and communications department. They may be your only contact with the international media, as short films rarely have their own publicist. The biggest festivals, for example Sundance, may inquire if the film has a publicist. In these cases, you can also ask the Finnish Film Foundation's international department for advice and recommendations. In any case, provide the festival's PR and communications department with a preview link and press kit of your film, as well as contact information to arrange possible interviews.

Realistically speaking, commercial feature films achieve the most international publicity, but maybe your short film will become a surprising festival hit!

If you are in contact with media representatives yourself, try to find some interesting topical angle in your film that helps to pitch the story. Sometimes being selected for a major festival and especially an award is newsworthy enough, but the media is usually more interested in phenomena than in merits.

WHAT TO DO WHEN ATTENDING A FESTIVAL

If you decide to attend the festival in person, you are the most important and perhaps the only ambassador of your own work. Take part in the Q&A sessions after the screening and be there to introduce the film if you are asked to. At its best, the festival is an important and rewarding opportunity to meet festival selectors, curators, funders, distributors, sellers, buyers, and other artists and producers.

Before the festival, think ahead what you are aiming at while networking:

- professional contacts?
- further screenings and distribution for your film?
- funding or other collaborations for your next production?

Remember that you can prepare for different encounters according to each audience or your own changing goals.

Attend networking events (often known as *happy hour*, *cocktails* or *industry drinks*, sometimes also *networking lunch/brunch*) and also chat with new acquaintances. Ask any familiar film industry representatives or other filmmakers present to introduce you to others.

If the festival has an industry programme, attending it can also be useful and rewarding. The programme may include various lectures, panel discussions, pitching events for works in production, or mentoring sessions for the filmmakers selected for the programme.

If the festival makes available a list of professionals participating in the event, it is advisable to go through it as early as possible before the festival: pick the most interesting contacts for your work and try to arrange a meeting with them or promote the screening of your film to them. You can also send a preview link.

Be thoughtful when sending out meeting requests. It is a waste of time for both you and another professional if you are trying to pitch a short animation to a sales company that specialises in full-length documentary films. Interesting contacts for AV-arkki's artists include, for example, festival programmers and other curators; representatives of museums, film archives and other cultural and artistic spaces; some international sales agents (first check if your film would fit into their catalogue); some TV channels and streaming services; media representatives. If you are already working on your next production, for which you might need new collaborations or talents (for example, in an artistic team), you can find a suitable contact at the festival.

Prepare for your meetings carefully: this way you will ensure that the information you want reaches the right person and that you are on the same page.

Also think about what you want to achieve at this meeting: are you presenting your current work or promoting future productions? Go back to the starting point of your distribution strategy: what environments and audiences you would want to reach with your film?

Remember to share photos from the event and meetings on social media. Has your film been written about in the media or posted on social media? Is there any audience feedback (for example in social review platforms like Letterboxd)?

Contact the people you meet again after the festival at the latest. Thank them for the meeting and review what you have agreed. If you have promised to send them some material (a link to your film, a link to your other works, pictures, additional information), do it promptly. You can also stay in touch with your new contacts by informing them, for example, about the next steps for your film (major festivals, distribution deals) and your next productions.

BEYOND FESTIVALS: WHAT OTHER OPTIONS FOR DISTRIBUTION THERE ARE

After the festival premiere, festivals are still a significant part of film distribution, especially for non-mainstream films – and especially short films. After an active festival tour, the work can still be performed in thematic screenings, for example.

Other presentation environments and opportunities include:

- exhibitions in museums, galleries and other art spaces
- special screenings in various cultural centres or independent art house theatres
- screenings in social contexts (e.g. seminars, NGO events, etc.), “impact campaign”
- broadcasting
- Video-on-demand
- licensing, for example, to airlines (less common, but theoretically not impossible for artists’ moving image)

Some of these environments may be difficult to reach on your own, so an international sales company could help (see next section).

If the work can be found in AV-arkki’s archive, it can enhance future possibilities for distribution, even if the film was not selected for AV-arkki’s festival distribution catalogue. Works can be rented from the archive even if they are already a couple of years old – or even older. In addition, AV-arkki can suggest your work for events or exhibitions based on the themes that programmers and curators are interested in.

Curators and programmers of various events and venues also follow the selections of major festivals and can become interested in your work that way. In this case, it is important that they can also easily and quickly find information on where to inquire about the screening rights and availability of your film.

Streaming services (VoD platforms) are an attractive but still uncertain environment from an economic point of view: a film can at best attract new audiences, but it can also be overwhelmed by a wide range of content. The generated revenue can be just a few euros from accumulated views, or a licensing worth hundreds or thousands of euros to a professional, large platform. The latter, unfortunately, is so far a rarer option.

It is not advisable to publish the film in its entirety on your own website, for example, as long as it has novelty value and is actively touring festivals. However, after an active festival tour, this is also an option if you want the work to be available for anyone to see.

Special screenings can also be arranged by yourself, most easily in Finland. There are several independent art house theatres in Finland and some local film centres with which you can negotiate screenings. For example, they can suggest sharing the ticket sales revenue or ask for rent for the space. If your work is a short film, consider whether it could be performed together with other short films, or whether the screening could include discussion or other additional elements.

YLE is also a distributor. Usually, YLE joins (if it does) the production already at the financing stage as an advance purchase, but sometimes YLE also acquires the screening rights to films that have already been completed. You can offer your production to YLE through their own, constantly open call for works: yle.fi/aihe/s/10002388

COLLABORATING WITH INTERNATIONAL SALES AGENTS

AV-arkki licenses the screening rights of films and installations for different periods of time to different environments, invoices screening fees for them and pays the agreed share of these fees as royalties to the producer. In this sense, its activities resemble those of sales companies. However, AV-arkki is a non-profit artist association, which distinguishes it from commercial sales and festival distribution companies operating in the film industry. Sometimes such commercial agencies are also interested in the works of AV-arkki member artists, especially if they have premiered at a major festival or won awards.

Kurzfilmagentur Hamburg, Interfilm, Square Eyes, New Europe Film Sales and Kino Rebelde are some examples of such sales agencies. They either specialise in short films or represent short films alongside feature-length films. Some are oriented towards mainstream narrative, while others are interested in artistically more experimental and challenging expression. Some handle both festival distribution and sales (i.e. licensing screening rights outside festivals), while others specialise in one or the other. AV-arkki and AV-arkki's member artists have collaborated with Raina Film Festival Distribution in the festival distribution.

Cooperation with sales agencies or festival distribution companies is not self-evident: They have to be very selective in terms of what kind of films they can include in their catalogue. They might work on a very limited number of titles per year.

If the sales agency approaches the artist, it is worth studying their website: what kind of films do they represent? What kind of festivals and venues have the films they represent gotten into? What references does the company have to present? If the company seems interesting, trustworthy and professional, you can send them a preview link to your film and ask for more information or a draft contract. You can also ask for advice from AV-arkki.

Some sales agencies make exclusive deals, some do not. If the contract is exclusive, no other company may distribute the work during the contract period. Exclusivity may be limited geographically or to a specific language area or screening environment: for example, a sales agency may require an exclusive festival distribution, but AV-arkki or the artist's gallerist may still take care of the distribution of the installation version to exhibitions. If you enter into an exclusive contract for a work that is also in AV-arkki's archive, you must inform AV-arkki about this and possibly bring AV-arkki into negotiation with the company. It is also worth going through the financial side of the agreement. If a company offers festival distribution, does it cost anything and what do you get for that price? How does the sales company distribute revenue, such as screening fees and awards?

If you end up collaborating with a sales agency, you will most likely be asked for additional promotional material, such as more still photos. The sales company may also want to refine the texts related to the films, especially the synopsis and logline, and negotiate the angle at which the work will be sold.

The task of the sales company is to licence the film to various outlets while the festival distributor distributes the work to the festival. It is essential to go through with these companies at the very beginning what is important to you. Companies can suggest your film for environments that you did not think of. This can be both good and bad, depending on how much you want to control the context in which your work is presented.

If you want to propose a film yourself to a sales agency or a company offering festival distribution, the best step to present your work is just when it is about to be completed and there is at least a rough cut version. In the case of short films, sales companies or distributors are usually not involved in the early stages of productions, but they usually want to participate in the planning and implementation of the festival strategy of the film included in their catalogue even before or at the latest immediately after the confirmed premiere.

If you approach sales agencies or distributors by email, it is essential to send a preview link and information about the film. If your film is premiering at a festival that also has sales representatives attending, you can also invite them to see it on site.

ADDITIONAL READING

Frame Contemporary Art Finland: Taiteilijan opas kansainvälistymiseen (in Finnish)
frame-finland.fi/ammattilaisille/palvelut-taiteilijoille/taiteilijan-opas-kansainvalistymiseen/

Advice for film distribution

www.objectifs.com.sg/recap-short-film-distribution/

www.studiobinder.com/blog/film-distribution-guide/

indiefilmhustle.com/film-distribution-guide/

sethero.com/blog/film-distribution-explained-the-ultimate-guide-to-selling-your-film/

On scam film festivals

www.ses.fi/en/story/international-outlooks-festivals-and-festivals/

www.submittingtofilmfestivals.com/scam-film-festivals/