

## **exground filmfest: A German success story in Wiesbaden – from experimental underground favourite to internationally recognized film festival\***

For years now, exground filmfest has been recognized as one of Hessen's largest and most important film festivals – one whose popularity reaches far beyond the borders of the state as well. Indeed, the number of yearly festival attendees has risen nearly 600% from 1990 to 2015, to a total of more than 14,000 guests. Every year for ten days in November, exground filmfest is not only an important destination for cinema fans from near and far, it's also an important forum for discussion for around 250 accredited journalists, trade visitors and guests from the film industry – that is to say, for important taste and opinion makers from the industry and beyond.

In 2016, the festival is celebrating 26 years of existence – reason enough to take a look back at its rich history and to reflect one more time on the most important developments since the founding of exground filmfest.

### **A clear program profile**

exground filmfest stands for quality and exciting entertainment. From the beginning, the organisational team has directed its gaze to cinema far removed from the world of Hollywood productions and chosen to offer a "challenging program consisting of international short and feature-length films beyond the standard premiere cinema fare" (Frankfurter Rundschau, November 13, 2001). The cornerstones of the festival are independent productions from the USA ("American Independents"), contemporary Asian films ("News from Asia" – which takes place today in the framework of the "International" section) as well as programs for international short and feature-length films – many of them screening as German or European premieres. The program is rounded off by an alternating country focus (2001 & 2008: Spain, 2002: Fennoscandia, 2003: Austria, 2004: Great Britain, 2005: France, 2006: Canada, 2007: Benelux, 2009: Sweden, 2010: Latin America, 2011: Israel, 2012: Switzerland, 2013: New Zealand, 2014: Mexico, 2015: Greece, 2016: Iran), retrospectives/ special series (2002: Pedro Almodóvar, 2003: Michael Haneke, 2004: Mike Figgis, 2005: Claire Denis, 2006: David Cronenberg, 2007: highlights from the first 20 editions of the festival, 2008: Julio Médem, 2009: Roy Andersson, 2010: Ulli Lommel, 2011: Eyal Sivan, 2012: highlights from the first 25 editions of the festival), documentary films and numerous competitions.

The reward for the years of exclusively unremunerated work that the organisational team has invested: receiving the Cultural Award 2000 from the State Capital of Wiesbaden – and of course the high level of acceptance and popularity that the festival has come to enjoy in the film world and with its audience over the years.

### **1990: It all started with experimental, independently produced films...**

That exground filmfest would develop so quickly into a film festival of international significance – that's surely something that its founding mothers and fathers didn't even dare to dream. In 1990, six film enthusiasts teamed up and founded the non-profit association Wiesbadener Kinofestival e. V. – with the goal of putting on a film festival featuring avant-garde and underground productions and to thus establish an alternative to the dreary monotony of the local cinema landscape. The availability of challenging and artistic films was very limited in Wiesbaden back in those days. All of the city's cinemas belonged to one owner, and he showed above all box office hits from Hollywood. On top of that was the fact that Wiesbaden still did not have a single arthouse cinema at the time – that is, no venue for productions beyond the commercially informed mainstream.

A film festival needs a name. Since the focal points of the festival were experimental films and underground productions, coining a new composite word from those elements seemed like the obvious thing to do: thus "exground". This was accompanied in the early years of the festival by "on screen". And with that the festival name "exground on screen" was born.

### **...and underground productions from the USA**

In the first two years of its existence, the festival took place twice a year over the course of four days each time. For the inaugural edition in April 1990, the festival team presented the spa town audience legends of independent cinema from New York like Richard Kern and Lydia Lunch, and, by way of comparison, the early films of Andy Warhol such as SLEEP and EMPIRE. The latter internationally famous cinematic work by Warhol shows a fixed, unbroken shot of the Empire State Building in Manhattan for eight whole hours. So, one can rightfully claim that the "American independents" already occupied a large portion of the program at exground's premiere edition – and that's how it has remained to this day. At the second edition of exground on screen in fall 1990 the program included among other films Rosa von Praunheim's AIDS TRILOGY and music films on the "Einstürzende Neubauten" and the Yugoslavian band "Laibach". In addition, film students from Wiesbaden and Offenbach presented their work to an interested audience that was open to experiments.

### **1992–95: Two become one...**

After two further editions of the festival, which featured among other things bizarre rediscoveries such as *FIRST SPACESHIP ON VENUS*, a science fiction feature shot in the GDR in the 1960s, and *BARBARELLA*, the structure of exground changed. From 1992 to 1995 the festival only took place once a year over the space of five to six days. Among the program highlights from these years of the festival were without a doubt the German premiere of the controversial Belgian film *MAN BITES DOG*, the early works of Peter Jackson, including the now cult classic *BRAINDEAD*, a retrospective honouring the German splatter icon Jörg Buttgereit and an Abel Ferrara special featuring the films *BAD LIEUTENANT* and *KING OF NEW YORK*.

### **1993: The birth of the German Short Film Competition...**

In 1993, exground brought to life a competition for German short films that has been successful all the way up to today – and heralded the short film genre's victorious march into the hearts of the inhabitants of the Hessen state capital. Since then this event has developed into a veritable audience magnet – in Wiesbaden, in the surrounding area and even far beyond: more and more viewers from near and far want to be involved in choosing which filmmakers get to take home part of the prize money totalling EUR 6,000 and the material prize worth a further EUR 2,000 added over the past years. For with all the surprises that exground filmfest has in store all over again each year– one thing is for sure: the screenings of the short film competition are always sold out immediately, down to the very last seat! The award ceremony always takes place on the last day of the festival – after the screening of the ten to 15 competition films, which all have to be produced in Germany and possess a running time of no more than maximum 20 minutes.

### **...followed later on by the international ON VIDEO Award**

Speaking of competitions: In 2002, an expert jury presented exground's ON VIDEO Award for the best international short film shot on video for the first time, a prize worth EUR 1,000. Every year since then, an international jury has decided anew which director gets to go back home with the award – at first for the "best film" on video and then later for the best international short film. In the beginning this new competition was connected to the goal of also offering a platform for up-and-coming artists who could not afford to shoot their work on film, instead opting for the significantly more affordable video medium. And the competition's

success has proven the festival's instincts to be right: these days so many artistically interesting and professionally produced short films of maximum 20 minutes are submitted to the international ON VIDEO Competition that the number of screenings has increased substantially from festival to festival. The increasing digitization of cinema has had an effect on this competition to the extent that the choice between the video and film formats has lost relevance in the meantime, which has led to the opening of the competition to other formats and its rechristening as the "International Short Film Competition".

### **The mid-90s: Short films gain a more prominent position...**

The increasing attention to the short film that took place from the mid-90s found its programmatic structure in the various thematically arranged series (for example on the themes of "living space", "music", "work and pleasure", "strange love", "life worlds" and "places, people, fates"), national or regional focuses (for example on Austria, the USA, Fennoscandia, Scotland, Brazil, China, The Netherlands, Spain, Iran and the Philippines), genre-specific short film sections (for example experimental films, animation, documentary films or music videos) – and in 2008 for the first time in a short film program devoted to a single artist, in this case the renowned Russian director Alina Rudnitskaya, and featuring in 2012 Igor Aljenikov, the Russian founder of Parallel Cinema. Since then, exground filmfest has shown countless short films from internationally respected directors and promising new talents – creative and fantastic etudes as well as award-winning short works produced with the highest degree of professionalism. Quite often the festival team was way ahead of its time with its choice of films – a number of notable short films celebrated their premieres in Wiesbaden before going on to become nominated for an Academy Award or even winning one. One example among many for the adept instincts of the selection committee: in 2003 the short documentary film FERRY TALES from German director Katja Esson celebrated its European premiere in Hessen's state capital – only to be nominated for an Academy Award just a few weeks later.

### **...and the series "News from Asia" makes its first appearance**

In 1995, exground initiated the series "News from Asia" with films from Takeshi Kitano and Wong Kar-wai, which has remained a cornerstone of the festival ever since (although since 2012, it has no longer been a separate film series of its own, instead being integrated in the "International" section). In this regard for instance Japanese, South Korean and Thai productions, but also films from Taiwan and Singapore, were able to be seen in Hessen's state capital, long before they became "fashionable" here and began to be made available to a wider audience as well. Here too the selection committee proved to be a reliable seismograph for the newest developments and trends on the international film market. Among the

highlights of exground filmfest's Asian programming focus were without a doubt several films by the now internationally renowned Takeshi Kitano, but also the German premieres of IN THE MOOD FOR LOVE by Wong Kar-wai, 9 SOULS by Toshiaki Toyoda (next to Takashi Miike, one of the most interesting representatives of the new Japanese cinema), as well as M by Ryuichi Hiroki. In the years 2011 and 2012, exground filmfest gave the new Philippine cinema its own focus – featuring among other films MONDOMANILA OR: HOW I FIXED MY HAIR AFTER A RATHER LONG JOURNEY by internationally renowned filmmaker Khavn De La Cruz.

### **1997: The program takes on an expanded framework**

The increased desire on the part of the festival organisers to bring even more interesting films from all over the world to Wiesbaden changed the structure of the festival once again. In 1995, they added another festival venue, from 1996 on the duration of exground was extended to ten days and in 1997 the organisational team created a fixed framework for the festival with the sections American Independents, News from Asia, International and Shorts – as well as events such as concerts and parties. In the years to come, the sections were expanded with the increasingly important documentary films, the country focuses, retrospectives, readings, exhibitions, panel discussions, talks with filmmakers and radio plays (!) in the cinema. At the same time, further competitions and venues were added.

### **1999: exground on screen officially becomes exground filmfest**

In 1999, the festival finally took on its final name as we know it today, "exground filmfest". In the past 26 years nearly 320,000 viewers have attended festival events. Individuals who would go on to win National Film Awards such as Oskar Röhler, Academy Award winner Les Bernstien and Josefine Preuß, recipient of among other things the Grimme Award and the German Television Award, have presented their films in Wiesbaden. The more than 3,000 submissions for the international program and the competitions that the festival receives annually today also testify to the catchy sound of the name in Germany and abroad. Many films from world renowned directors and actors have celebrated their German or European premieres in Wiesbaden, including works from or featuring Quentin Tarantino, Mike Figgis, Wayne Wang, Peter Jackson, Abel Ferrara, Hal Hartley, Gregg Araki, Wong Kar-wai, Takeshi Kitano, Kijoshi Kurosawa, Julian Schnabel, Christopher Walken and Tim Burton. Time and again the team from exground filmfest has proven that it knows how to "(...) (work) as a reliable seismograph that shows where something's going on in the world of international cinema". (Strandgut, November 2002).

#### **2004: The rejuvenating power of "youth days"**

With the "youth days" exground filmfest has been providing a forum since 2004 to introduce young people from the age of twelve and up to the medium of film – far beyond the usual uniform fare presented on television and in mainstream theatres. With this step, the festival organisers were aiming to kill two birds with one stone – and indeed this has worked out quite well. On one hand, they saw here the possibility to entice twelve- to 18-year-olds to check out some of the rest of the films on offer at exground filmfest beyond those of the international youth film program and thus to draw in a new, younger audience segment – while on the other hand they saw the chance to significantly rejuvenate the organisation by integrating younger blood in the ranks of the festival team and thus ensure that there would be a future for exground filmfest.

#### **2005: Three new competitions are launched**

In 2005, the youth film festival within the festival was expanded into the "youth days – International Youth Film Competition" and endowed with prize money in the amount of EUR 2,500, which has been awarded since then by a five-member jury composed of school-aged students from Wiesbaden. The films selected for this section from submissions from all over the world are characterised by their treatments of the lived realities of young people that are not approached from the adult perspective, but which instead offer immediate potential for identification – among other things due to the fact that the films have often been conceived in part in co-operation with young (non-professional) actors. In 2005, the "youth days" were extended with the "Wiesbaden Youth Film Competition": since then, young talents from the ages of twelve to 18 have had the big chance to present their films to a large audience that then picks the winning entry. And from 2007 on this short film competition for local youth has been endowed with prize money in the amount of EUR 450 (which was increased in 2016 to EUR 500) – and further complemented by a material prize valued at EUR 150 since 2014.

Why look off into the distance, when there's so much good stuff so close to home? Following this axiom, the "Wiesbaden-Special – Short Film Competition" was initiated in 2005. This audience awarded competition for best short film from a local director, endowed with a prize of EUR 500, proved to be a big hit with the audience and a big draw from its very first edition. And the festival team once again displayed their keen talent for putting together a compelling program: the first prize-winning film, Stephan Müller's MR. SCHWARTZ, MR. HAZEN & MR. HORLOCKER, was subsequently honoured at numerous international festivals – even at the

Cannes International Film Festival. Two other winning films enjoyed a similar level of success: 2006's BENIDORM from Carolin Schmitz, which subsequently won the German Film Award among other honours, and 2008's BETWEEN from Tim Bollinger, who won Hessen's Film Academy Award with his production. A heartening side effect: successes of this nature also serve to strengthen the organisers of exground filmfest's commitment to the festival location in Wiesbaden.

### **2007: 20 editions of exground filmfest are more than enough reason to celebrate**

Even before the official start of the festival in 2007, the organisers of exground filmfest had already set a new record: more than 2,500 short and feature-length films were submitted for consideration – nearly 300 productions from 37 countries made it past the final cut of the expert committee, including of course more than a few film treats discovered in the scope of visits to other festivals. In 2007, exground filmfest showed once again the highlights of the world-wide production of independently produced short and feature-length films: the best of 365 days of viewing sessions and festival visits.

The festival organisers also continued a beloved tradition regarding guests: many filmmakers, actors and camera people from around the world presented their films to audiences in Wiesbaden personally and discussed them with the viewers. In doing so, the guests once again provided that unique international but simultaneously intimate flair that exground has become known for and were able to direct festival attendees' attention to other cultures and mentalities, at least for ten days.

On the occasion of the 20th edition of exground filmfest, the organisers came up with a special "treat": they decided to show highlights from the first 19 festival editions again, including works as diverse as the splatter movie NEKROMANTIK by Jörg Buttgereit, Abel Ferrara's character study about a corrupt cop BAD LIEUTENANT (starring Harvey Keitel), the cult film ROADKILL from Canada's Bruce McDonald, the scandalous film by the famous American photographer and filmmaker Larry Clark, KEN PARK, and CHUNGKING EXPRESS, with which Hong Kong's Wong Kar-wai made his triumphant entrance into the international festival scene.

### **2008: Two new events testify to the uninterrupted will to innovate**

For the 21st edition of exground filmfest, a further international competition celebrated a thoroughly successful premiere in Wiesbaden among other places: in the scope of BETTING

ON SHORTS, an event organised by the London Institute of Contemporary Arts, film festivals in Athens, Barcelona, Istanbul, London, Maribor, Munich, Naples, Novi Sad, Paris, Poznan, Stockholm and Wiesbaden showed a competition program consisting of international short films treating the theme "money, money, money" on November 21, 2008. The catch: the audience was invited to place bets on the winners in Wiesbaden and the European champion before the screenings of the program. The basis for the betting were short synopses for the films and a film still from each, as well as short biographies of the directors; the audience received this information around two hours before the program was to be shown. In addition, short clips of the selected films were shown on the website [www.bettingonshorts.com](http://www.bettingonshorts.com) and in the participating locations from November 15, 2008 on.

A further innovation at exground filmfest was met with an equally enthusiastic response: the organisational team finally managed to bring the Hamburg-based group A WALL IS A SCREEN, who had become quite successful throughout Europe in the meantime, to Wiesbaden. Around 200 short film fans took part in an evening cinematic stroll through downtown Wiesbaden, in which the streets were turned into projection rooms and the facades of houses were transformed into screens for moving pictures. After this successful premiere, A WALL IS A SCREEN returned to the Hessian state capital just in time for the opening of exground filmfest 22 – on Friday, November 13, 2009, appropriately enough with a stack of horror films in tow. And this time almost 500 viewers were on hand to experience the spectacle live! In 2010, once again hundreds of viewers joined the procession on its route from Caligari FilmBühne to the opening party in Kulturpalast. Nowadays A WALL IS A SCREEN is an integral part of exground filmfest with its annual turnout of around 500 cinephile "strollers" – and the still growing response shows that this unusual form of cinema has also found its fans in Wiesbaden in the meantime, even in the rain or snow!

### **2009: "News from Germany" as an additional festival series**

Everything that has applied to exground filmfest for a long time now also applies to German cinema, which is increasingly multi-faceted and internationally successful. The organisational team for the festival's 22nd edition dedicated a separate film series to this category for the first time: "News from Germany". Nowadays the section is also an essential part of the program for exground filmfest – since 2014 under the catchier name "Made in Germany". In addition, in 2009 two institutions used the international film festival in Wiesbaden as a certified professional platform for their competitions. The Federal Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs presented the prize winners of its nationwide competition "Film ab! 50" and in the framework of the opening of the exground youth days the Intervideo Award for Young

Filmmakers from the Mainz-based film production company of the same name was presented for the first time. The latter received the German Cultural Sponsorship Prize for 2010, which once again indirectly confirmed the reputation of exground filmfest as a tested platform for high-quality short and feature-length film programs.

### **2010: The first homage in the history of exground filmfest**

For the first time in its 20-year festival history, exground filmfest devoted a retrospective to an artist: the curtain opened for eight films featuring German actor, screenwriter and director Ulli Lommel, who made cinema history with several of his own works. Among them are LOVE IS COLDER THAN DEATH (with Lommel in the role of an ice-cold gangster in Fassbinder's first outing), THE TENDERNESS OF WOLVES from 1973 (Lommel's breakthrough as a director), as well as two cult films produced by Andy Warhol, BLANK GENERATION from 1978 (with a fantastic performance from Carole Bouquet in one of the main roles), and COCAINE COWBOYS from 1979 (featuring Hollywood star Jack Palance, among others). Lommel also did pioneering genre work, for instance with his horror thriller THE BOOGEYMAN from 1980, his most commercially successful turn as a director (including a four-week run as number one at the US box office). The homage was rounded off with a reading by Ulli Lommel, from his autobiography ZÄRTLICHKEIT DER WÖLFE – BEGEGNUNGEN in Wiesbaden's Wartburg and the opening of his exhibition "American PhotoNovellas" at Art Gallery Wiesbaden.

### **2011 and 2012: A comprehensive retrospective and special anniversary highlights**

In 2011, exground filmfest presented a comprehensive retrospective of a single artist for the first time: in the scope of the country focus for Israel, the organisational team showed the multi-award-winning documentary films of Eyal Sivan, whose work has been unusually controversial, especially in Israel. As a result, once again exground filmfest proved its importance as a platform for intensive exchange and heated discussion. For the 25th anniversary edition of the festival in 2012, the organisational team surprised the festival audience with two very special program items: the exhibition YOU, FORTUNATE EYES from Israel's most renowned contemporary photographer Rudi Weissenstein, and KINO À LA MINUTE from Swiss performance artist Nora de Baan, which served as an atypical expansion of the country focus for Switzerland. In addition, in the scope of a look back at 25 years of festival history, exground filmfest showed highlights from past editions of the festival, including TIME OF THE WOLF by Michael Haneke, THE THREE BURIALS OF MELQUIADES ESTRADA from Tommy Lee Jones – and a program prepared especially for the occasion by American director Karl Nussbaum titled THE ART OF FILM AND VIDEO PERFORMANCE.

For the youth days, an additional award was introduced in 2011: an – as yet – unfunded prize for the best short film in the framework of the youth film festival from exground filmfest.

### **2013: A complete national film history in focus for the first time**

In the scope of the country focus for New Zealand, the organisational team prepared a special treat for the festival audience: for the first time, the organizers of exground filmfest took a look at the development of a national cinema history going back 60 years. Exceptional and rarely screened treasures from the archives were featured as well as an early work of LORD OF THE RINGS director Peter Jackson, classics such as Jane Campion's THE PIANO, contemporary productions from New Zealand's crop of talented young filmmakers – and the biggest box office hit ever from the country, BOY, as the festival's opening film.

One of the highlights in the traditional festival series: with the Israeli political thriller BETHLEHEM by Yuvan Adler, the organisational team managed to present the winner of six Israeli Film Awards and the country's Academy Award submission to the festival audience in Wiesbaden for its German premiere. However, exground filmfest's close connection to its roots in experimental and underground film was also apparent once again in the programming choices for this year in particular. In addition to artsy fare à la Edward Hopper, SHIRLEY – VISIONS OF REALITY, the festival also showed the taboo-breaking documentary OUTING (also from Austria), subcultural musings from John Waters, in the form of I AM DIVINE, and electronic underground cinema from Moscow: ELEKTRO MOSKWA. The exground youth days were expanded too: the EUR 2,500 prize of the Wiesbaden youth jury in the "youth days – International Youth Film Competition" was joined by an audience award with a cash prize in the amount of EUR 1,000.

### **2014: Two opening films, including a Wiesbaden success story**

For the 27th edition of exground filmfest, the organisers again succeeded in setting out on new paths. They opened the festival with not one but two films – a double dose of Mexican cinema to go with the year's country focus. The festival also featured several international premieres with THE HAMSTERS by Gilberto González Penilla and Jorge Ramírez-Suárez's GOOD DAY, RAMÓN, which was shot primarily in Wiesbaden and became an unexpected box office hit in Mexico in 2014. The festival program also offered a highlight that was unprecedented in its history, in regards to the linking of film with other art genres: a re-interpretation of Terry Gilliam's BRAZIL by the Swiss group pulp.noir. In the scope of a live remix at

Caligari FilmBühne, trippy clips were created using the original grotesquely surreal film material, transposing Gilliam's Kafkaesque vision of the future from 1985 (including the surveillance state it portrays) into the year 2014.

### **2015 & 2016: DAS BRETT – the world's first prize awarded by a jury of prison inmates**

In these two festival years as well, a number of international productions celebrated their premieres in Wiesbaden, including Roni Ezra's feature film debut EVERYTHING'S GONNA BE PINK, a world premiere. In the scope of the country focus for Greece at exground filmfest 28, the Hellenes showed the incredible power that situations of crisis can unleash – three of the works, which were also very innovative formally, even made it into German theatres following the festival: CHEVALIER by Athina Rachel Tsangari, FOREVER by Margarita Manda and RIVERBANKS by Panos Karkanavatos. The program for the Focus Iran section at exground filmfest 29 was filled to the brim, with not only ten full-length fiction features and documentaries, but also two short film programs, an exhibition of the Iranian video artist Jinoos Taghizadeh and a concert from the internationally known indie rock band "Langtunes". In addition to Wiesbaden, further event locations in Frankfurt/Main and Darmstadt were added. On top of that, the festival premiered an award endowed with EUR 1,000 presented by a jury composed of inmates from a correctional facility, the first such prize of its kind world-wide: DAS BRETT, for the best film in the "Made in Germany" series. The highlight of the remaining sections was without a doubt the double feature from American indie legend Jim Jarmusch, with his tragicomedy PATERSON and his documentary on the bad boy and proto-punk icon Iggy Pop, GIMME DANGER, a screening for which the filmmaking master had to give his personal blessing. Perhaps exground filmfest's well-earned international reputation was of no small help in securing it?

### **exground filmfest: Far more than just an annual film festival**

The non-profit association Wiesbadener Kinofestival e. V. hasn't only made its presence felt through its exground filmfest taking place every November. From 1997 until 2011, the association also put on an annual program in May, six months out from the big festival – featuring films grouped under thematic aspects such as food, water, horror, or the "summer of love" and "dance into May". In addition, in 2016 the team put on a "half-time" program between the 28th and 29th festival editions with the program "Film and Karaoke: Sing into May". Aside from that, once a month since 1999 the festival team has shown an "exground film of the month" at Wiesbaden's Caligari FilmBühne – and since 2005 they've added an "exground youth film of the month". On top of that, the film festival is present the whole year with its

series "Film and Breakfast" and "Wiesbaden: Movie City". Last but not least, it's become a time-honoured tradition for exground filmfest to present a "best of" program at the Orfeo's Erben cinema in Frankfurt/Main.

### **Internationally connected and in demand**

The solid footing that the festival has increasingly gained in the international festival scene from year to year and the festival's ever more intensive exchange with other international film festivals are further signs that exground filmfest has long since reached full maturity. For example in this regard Wiesbaden's partner city San Sebastian in Northern Spain was represented at exground filmfest in November 2003 by the Basque short film program KIMUAK – in 2007 and 2012 the Basque Studies Institute again presented a short film program on the occasion of the 10th and 15th anniversaries of KIMUAK, and in 2009 the International Short Film Festival in Uppsala showed the best films from the Swedish competition in the scope of the country focus on Sweden. Other festivals from Germany and Japan have also visited Wiesbaden's Caligari FilmBühne regularly to present themselves to the local audience, including Nippon Connection from Frankfurt/Main, goEast – Festival of Central and Eastern European Film from Wiesbaden and the Pia International Film Festival from Tokyo. In addition, the Festival "CineForte3" in Tel Aviv presented a "best of" program from exground filmfest to an Israeli audience in February 2004 – and in 2012 a specially curated program from the festival's organisational team was shown at KAN Film Festival in Wroclaw, Poland. Also on the occasion of exground filmfest's anniversary the organisers of the festival received a special honour: for the first time exground filmfest was presented at the Hessen state government reception in the framework of the Berlinale in February 2007 – along with the International Childrens' Film Festival LUCAS, the Open Air Film Festival Weiterstadt and the Hessian Youth Media Festival Visionale. Trailers, film clips, posters and catalogues gave the many industry guests convincing insight into the diversity and increasing significance of Hessen's film festivals for Germany's festival scene.

### **From tiny sprout to full bloom, exground has come a long way – but all the growth and success have not dampened the festival organizers' passion for experimentation**

exground filmfest is a member of the working group for city culture, the Wiesbaden Chamber of Commerce's committee for the cultural sector, the Association of Hessian Film Festivals and the Federal Association Working Group for Short Films. In June 2002, exground filmfest was accepted into the European Coordination of Film Festivals (ECFF) – the European representation for film festivals in Brussels. This membership enabled the festival to take ad-

vantage of ECFF's film program services and intensify exchange and networking efforts with other European festivals up until the association's dissolution in 2010. One positive side effect: in the meantime, the name exground filmfest not only rings a bell in the Rhine-Main area, but also in Tokyo, Los Angeles and New York, where the film festival has had its own representation for years. "250 accredited industry guests in attendance shows how far the reputation of the exground festival has reached on an international level as well through the years. But in spite of this expansion, as Wiesbaden's Cultural Department head Rita Thies stated in her opening speech, exground has stayed true to its roots in enthusiastic experimentation." (Filmecho/Filmwoche 48, November 2002).

### **Helpers and supporters as co-authors of this success story**

Without the volunteer work of the approximately 15-member organisational team, but also without the innumerable volunteer helpers during the festival itself, the success story that is the history of exground filmfest would certainly have been unimaginable. Throughout all of those years, it was also of course essential that a whole range of institutions and companies gave the organisers of exground filmfest a generous helping hand with funds and other donations. Here we would like above all to mention the Cultural Office of the State Capital of Wiesbaden, the Hessen Film Trust (from 2016: HessenFilm und Medien GmbH) and the Hessen State Ministry for Higher Education, Research and the Arts.

### **Magnificent festival centre: the Caligari FilmBühne**

The festival centre is the heritage-protected Caligari FilmBühne in the heart of Wiesbaden, in close proximity to the market square and Hessen's state parliament, whose art-deco theatre dating from cinema's golden age seats around 430 viewers. An ample foyer provides space for further festival events, while the bar offers refreshments – and persuades guests to settle in and stay a while. The events of the supporting program for exground filmfest take place in the foyer of Caligari FilmBühne, including panel discussions, readings, concerts, parties, karaoke events, lounges, special film screenings, video installations, art performances and exhibitions, which are regularly sold out.

Aside from the Caligari FilmBühne as festival centre, the Kulturpalast and the Alpha Kino (until 2009) have served as two further fixed venues for exground filmfest in downtown Wiesbaden, providing a total of 200 seats. As an additional venue, the Murnau Filmtheater, which has a capacity of 100 seats, joined the list of festival locations in 2009 and was subsequently officially established as a third primary venue in addition to Caligari FilmBühne and Kulturpalast for the 23rd edition of the festival in 2010.

## **The future: exground filmfest is well equipped for increasing competition for the best films and for the unstoppable rise of digital formats**

One difficulty for the festival, organised by volunteers as it is, is the ever increasing commercialisation of the film market. Rental fees have increased drastically over the past years. On top of that, due to the increasing number of festivals out there, films are handed over to festivals with hesitation and under far more restrictive conditions than they once were, if they are handed over at all. The increased competition for interesting films has made it more and more difficult for the organisers of exground filmfest to assemble a film program of the high quality that the audience has come to expect – all the more so considering that the festival's budget is not even remotely close to that of other German film festivals.

A further challenge is represented by the digitization of cinema, which has led to a real wild proliferation of formats over the course of the last years. As a result, it's not a rare occurrence that a "film" first has to be painstakingly converted to a common screening format in order to be able to present it to an audience at all. The ascendancy of digital formats has also compelled the festival team to open up the German Short Film Competition to other screening formats, to rename the ON VIDEO Competition (launched in 2002) as the International Short Film Competition and to make the requirements for submission formats narrower.

However, the internet age, global interconnection (especially through social media) and increasing mobile communication have also offered opportunities for exground filmfest. Since 2006, filmmakers have also had the option of submitting their films through the internet platform reelport: they upload – and exground downloads. This has led to a sharp rise in the number of submissions. In addition, since 2012 friends of exground filmfest have been able to inform themselves in great detail about the festival's program on their mobile devices using a specially developed exclusive exground app. And of course both exground filmfest and the exground youth days have maintained a presence on Facebook for some years now.

For the still all-volunteer selection committee of exground filmfest, the flood of submissions represents an immense challenge in successfully separating the wheat from the chaff. Thanks to their high level of expertise and experience, these skilful "truffle pigs" from Wiesbaden have thus far always managed to find the tastiest film morsels and convince them to come and celebrate their premieres at exground filmfest.

\* By: Gerald Pucher, exground filmfest (as of November 9, 2016)