What follows is a proposal for a visual arts exhibition project for Hull 2017, imagined for the new dockside gallery space in the city and pitched at the second of the year’s four themed seasons, Roots and Routes. The proposal has been scaled at a level of ambition suggested by an approximate City of Culture budget of £35K per show in that space, and with the idea that for certain of the newly commissioned moving-image works outlined here additional sums from Film and Video Umbrella (and possible other partners) could also be found. The proposal is also alert to the potential for creating links between cities such as Rotterdam in Holland and Aarhus in Denmark, which have historical links or contemporary affinities with Hull. Because of the outward-looking, international dimension of Roots and Routes, the proposal will highlight points of contact and exchange, as well as draw out points of difference and of universality. Central to the proposal is the elemental influence of the sea, as an agent of exploration and discovery but also as a place of vigilance, and, in our contemporary moment, of increasing ecological threat. As well as its international compass, finding connections and building bridges across the North Sea, the proposal also outlines possible partnerships with other venues and institutions in the UK, which share Hull’s geographical context and its maritime history. Finally, for those who might spot it, the title of the exhibition contains an allusion to a well-known poem by Philip Larkin, echoing and adapting the final line of ‘The Whitsun Weddings’.

SOMEWHERE BECOMING SEA

The city of Kingston-Upon-Hull lies on the junction of the River Hull and the Humber Estuary, a few miles from where it reaches the open sea. The city’s location, in sheltered waters but with almost immediate direct access to the ocean, has made it a thriving port with a long and proud history. Hull’s relationship to the sea is measured in changing tides and marked by fluctuating fortunes. Out there, beyond the waterfront, at the shifting threshold where the river becomes the sea, is the source of the city’s past prosperity: obtained from fishing fleets and mercantile trade. No longer the happy hunting ground it used to be, the sea has acquired a different complexion in recent times. Although always feared and respected as a turbulent elemental force by the crews of the offshore trawlers that set out from the port, the sea has become an agent of erosion along much of this stretch of the coast. It is safe to say that, within a short radius of Hull, and on an all too regular basis, a small part of the land is somewhere becoming sea.

Rising sea levels caused by climate change will almost certainly only exacerbate this problem. That this part of the East coast is at the frontline of this growing phenomenon is reflected, perhaps, in the preponderance of wind turbines sited along the blustery East coast, and the increasing investment of various European countries in this form of green energy.

Rising sea levels have affected this part of the planet not just in recent times, but over millennia. A short distance out from Hull is the beginning of the former landmass of Doggerland – a vast ‘land bridge’ that used to connect Britain with mainland Europe before it was lost to the sea after the end of the last Ice Age. A symbol of dramatically changing geography and ecology, Doggerland survives in the language of nautical charts and the famous Radio 4 Shipping Forecast. Not just a place of myth (the so-called ‘British Atlantis’), Doggerland’s former features are also increasingly being exhumed by archaeological surveys and soundings, which have dredged up ancient mammoth bones and found myriad evidence of human habitation.

The changing boundaries between land and sea, and the extent to which this urgent subject has an international dimension, will form the backdrop to a series of artists’ works, to be collected together as an exhibition. In proposing the artists below, I have put forward pieces that are currently being considered by FVU, and for which we feel we can attract other partner funding to make any exhibition budget that is available from Hull 2017 go further. Where the suggested works are not likely to be ones that FVU will directly invest in, I have identified potential funding routes (from the Netherlands or Denmark) that can be followed up, if they haven’t been well researched already.

*The Sea is an Edge and an Ending* by Lavinia Greenlaw

Lavinia Greenlaw is one of Britain’s most acclaimed and accomplished poets. Film and Video Umbrella worked with her closely on a recent online project, called *Stay Where You Are*, and has been in discussion with Lavinia about extending some of the writing she generated for it into what would be her first artist’s film. The subject matter of the film will follow much of that earlier writing in focusing on her father’s slow decline into Alzheimers, with its poignant loss of memory and identity. Greenlaw grew up on the Essex coast, and its shorelines are a constant source of reminiscence and reflection. Their shifting tidal sands, and the image of the fragile North Sea coastline fighting off the incursions and depredations of the sea, have powerful metaphorical significance for any meditation on the blurring and eroding of the powers of the mind. Evoking a number of literary references (notably the relationship of Prospero and Miranda from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*), Greenlaw’s film will draw its inspiration also from the distinctive coastal landscapes of the East of England. It will be shot in collaboration with the renowned director, Grant Gee, maker of *Patience (after Sebald*). Because we have started developing the project in discussion with the Estuary Festival in Tilbury in Essex, we may shoot key scenes near there, although there is obvious scope, should a partnership with Hull come to fruition, to supplement or replace these with locations near Humberside. It goes without saying also that Greenlaw’s literary reputation will sit well with the focus on poetry (and the poetics of everyday life and emotion exemplified by Philip Larkin) that will be bound to be a feature of Hull 2017.

*New Film Work* by Nikolaj Bendix Skyum Larsen

Nikolaj Larsen is a Danish artist film-maker, who FVU commissioned to make the recent *Portrait of a River*. That film is one of several intimate, evocative diaristic mini-documentaries by Larsen that illuminate and give expression to micro-communities within particular localities. Among his films is *Tomorrow Everything is Possible* – a warm, heartfelt portrait of daytime drinkers in Aarhus, where Larsen used to live. His focus is often on the overlooked or the marginal but his formal language and his visual imagery is hugely accessible. Ships and boats as examples of miniature communities, and places outside of day-to-day society, are an abiding interest for Larsen. A film made on such a vessel, journeying back and forth across the North Sea, may be of appeal to both Hull and Aarhus. Larsen is held in high regard in Denmark, although he now lives in Paris, and knows curators and exhibition directors in both Aarhus and Esbjerg (on the west coast, opposite Hull). It seems highly plausible that Danish partnership funding could be found for a new film piece by him.

*New Wall-Based Photographic Work* by Annabel Howland

 Annabel Howland is a British-born, Dutch-based artist, who FVU commissioned to make a series of photographic and moving-image works for the group project *Silicon Fen*, which explored commonalities between the landscapes of Holland and East Anglia. Her interest in maps and charts as visual and conceptual indices of actual topographies would make her an ideal person to investigate (and give visual shape to) the undersea contours of Doggerland. Her wall-based works use cut-out elements of landscape images abstracted into the form of relief maps or other cartographies or arrayed into other material forms. Having lived in Amsterdam for more than twenty years, and with a substantial exhibition profile across Holland, and internationally, she qualifies as Dutch, and has been in regular receipt of Mondriaan Foundation funding.

<http://www.fvu.co.uk/projects/drains-cables-and-cuts>

http://www.annabelhowland.nl/

*Prime Timers* by Rob Crosse

While the above two pieces are by artists with whom FVU has had a previous connection (but would be unlikely to be able to support in production of a new work), a fourth potential project could be something that, like the Greenlaw film, could be developed as part of a wider partnership, including some funding from FVU itself. We are interested in continuing conversations with an extremely promising emerging artist called Rob Crosse. One idea that Rob has pitched to us is for an observational essay film shot on a cruise ship, following a group of ‘prime timers’: gay men of a certain age, who are both attractive to, and attracted to, younger gay men. A play on the notion of cruising as an escape from landbound, hidebound identities, the piece will reflect on time passing quickly in life but slowly at sea, with its unchanging vistas and its need for excitement. The film (possibly also involving a partnership between the liner/ferry ports of Tilbury and Hull) might make an interesting counterpoint to the Larsen film suggested above.