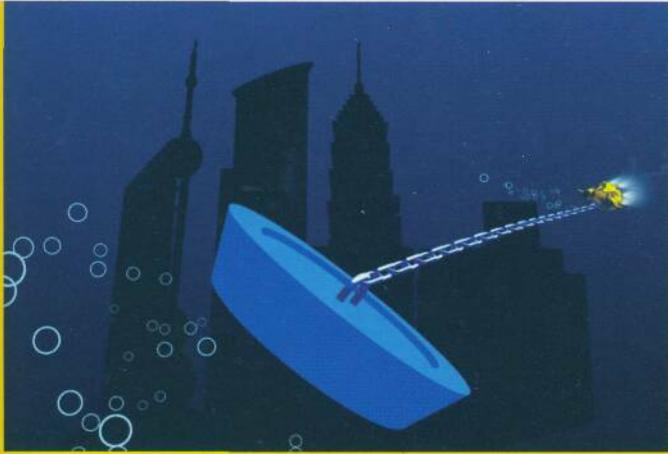




smith & foulkes

Impressed by their work for U2, Honda and The Observer, International Rescue call on Smith & Foulkes – the Morecambe & Wise of advertising – to shore up Thunderbirds' animated title sequence. You bet it's F-A-B, says Danny Edwards



Credits where credit's due: various stills from the team's work on Thunderbirds

"Our main job is to find an approach to something, a visual approach be it 2D, 3D, puppets or live action and then decide what sort of style we want to do it in. On Honda we went down the Chinese art sort of way, but it's finding that initial approach, then finding a great idea to fit it and then getting some very good people in to do it"

Although there are no plans for a Christmas special and Angela Rippon has yet to make an appearance, Smith & Foulkes claim - with tongues firmly wedged in cheeks - to be the Morecambe and Wise of advertising. What they are referring to is their prolific use of jokes, which are allowed to roam untethered throughout their conversation and work. "I think our use of humour is an unconscious thing," says Smith. "We didn't always realise that we were doing it. But then we read a review of the Thunderbirds title sequence which called it 'stylish but silly'. It kind of hit the nail on the head. Finally, after all these years, we realised what it was we were doing." Thirty-eight-year-old Alan Smith and 34-year-old Adam Foulkes met a decade ago at the Royal College of Art. As their animation course drew to a close and the real world beckoned, it seems the pack instinct took hold. "We had to make individual films at college, but we thought that maybe it was a good idea to go out into the big, bad world as a duo," reveals Smith.

"Besides, we would always end up chipping in on each other's films," adds Foulkes, "so we ended up working together." Before the duo had time to dip their toes into the murky waters of real life, an international rock band came calling. It was 1997 and U2 were looking for dazzling visuals to screen at their upcoming Popmart tour. "They had this huge TV-set type thing and they wanted to show work on that," says Smith. "And the person who sourced all the material came to the Royal College to look for cheap - sorry, I mean up-and-coming - work. We got some of our stuff in and they commissioned some more, and that was our first commercial job." The U2 work also coincided with the birth of Nexus Animation, the company founded by Chris O'Reilly and Charlotte Bavasso which has been home to the duo since its inception. And so Smith & Foulkes was born, or rather Vehicle was born, that being their appellation up until about a year ago, one that reflects the penchant for faceless and slightly mysterious directing.

"We did an inflight video for Virgin Airways. They wanted an animated safety film. It was a good project, but we also knew there'd be film executives sitting on every flight who would be forced to watch it. A real captive audience"



(Above) Good for your elf: Scenes from Lemony Snicket's *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. (Right and below) One for the road: Honda Grrr



nomenclatures. "Yeah," reflects Foulkes, "we realised that it was neither clever nor funny so we ditched it for the simpler Smith & Foulkes. We liked the idea that we sounded like bespoke tailors. Or is it more family butchers?" Whatever they were calling themselves, the pair have since directed some of the most stylish and humorous commercial work of recent years including The Observer's Abba to Zappa, Xbox's Portal and Honda's fabulous Grrr which has already picked up a slew of awards and is a hot tip for the Cannes festival. The key word in that last sentence though is directed. They are not, they say, animators, even admitting, in unison, to being "not very good animators really". "It's just that we never wanted to limit what we did to how technically good it looked," Smith explains, for what you can tell isn't the first time. "We get very talented animators in to do their thing and though we do animate as well we just get really good people to work with."

"On Honda," continues Foulkes, "there were 25 people. Character animators, people who are good with lighting or graphics or compositing. As the ambition grows you need more people to realise it. It's harder to concentrate on the bigger picture if you're focused in on a small part of it."

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way, but it's finding that initial approach, then finding a great idea to fit it and then getting some very good people in to do it."

The pigeonhole effect is something they're very keen to avoid, as is the stereotypical view of the geeky guys playing on computers in their bedrooms. Though animation is what they've done up to this point, there's nothing, they say, stopping them from moving into live action apart from, it seems, other people's prejudices. "We were approached by a very big production company recently," Smith recalls, "to do some animation for one of their jobs and we had to explain that we're directors, not animators and their comment was something like, 'it never works when animators think they're directors, does it?' which was extremely amusing."

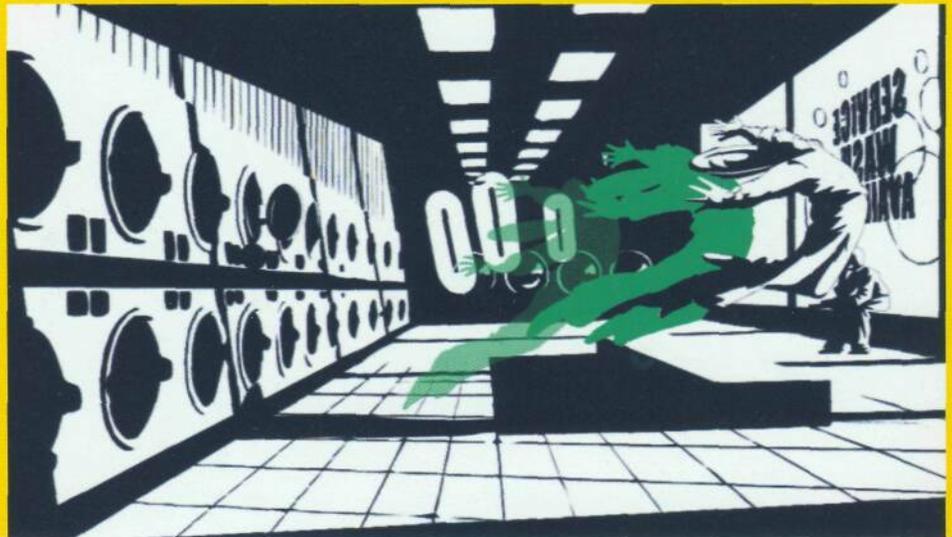
"I was listening to the Oscars coverage on the radio in March," says Foulkes, warming to the theme, "and they interviewed Brad Bird [director of *The Incredibles*], and the first thing the guy was asked was; 'are you going out partying tonight or are you staying in with your computer?'. I mean, imagine saying to Scorsese, 'you off out tonight Marty or are you just going to mooch about and film stuff?'. I was just like, for God's sake."

Although animation is not the be-all and end-all for Smith & Foulkes, there are still areas they want to explore, namely feature-length animation. They've worked on opening credit sequences for the

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(Above) Character sketches: The Observer's Abba to Zappa.
(Right and below) The joy of X: Smith & Foulkes's stark and contrasting work for Xbox



aftermentioned Thunderbirds movie and also for last year's Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events, which has led to talks with DreamWorks about future projects with the studio. Their entry into the features world wasn't just luck though as the team had a carefully hatched plan that has paid dividends as well as highlighting their savvy operational skills. "Well, we did an inflight video for Virgin Airways," Smith explains. "They wanted an animated safety film. It was a good project, but we also knew there'd be film executives sitting on every flight who would be forced to watch it. A captive audience."

Asked how they operate as a team they seem slightly flummoxed, as if they're not quite sure. "Well," offers Foulkes, "I make a lot of tea." "He does," confirms Smith, nodding contentedly. "But, I suppose," Foulkes continues, "we pretty much share all aspects of it. One of us might do a bit more character design or a bit more background but we sit down at the beginning of a project and go through what we're both thinking. The important thing is that we're not scared to try things. One of us has to kick the project off for the other to come in and change it."

One worry that the duo initially harboured was that the eclectic nature of their work would ultimately factor against them. That people wouldn't really know what they were about. Although it's all animation, the style, design and

approach to each project varies wildly from the monochrome stillness of Xbox to the multicoloured madness of Honda. Now, though, the fact that they can be so diverse is a main selling point, as Michael Russoff and Sean Thompson, two of the creatives on Grrr, attest. "They seem to be able to turn their hand to anything," Russoff says. "It's incredibly liberating to work with people like that, people without fixed moorings, without a style to protect or guard. They're genuinely open. Lots of people pretend to be like that, but then you push them and they end up defending their corner and returning to something safe and familiar." Thompson adds: "They gave the film its three-dimensional quality, inventing new characters and designing new sequences. They're great collaborators, always willing to push stuff as far as it will go." The only real common theme, and one they're very proud of, is the streak of humour running throughout their oeuvre. "The comedy of atmosphere," Foulkes eloquently calls it.

So where now for this directing double act? "Hollywood," fires Smith without hesitation. "Or Bollywood, maybe," muses Foulkes with a distant look in his eye. "Yeah, the first animated Bollywood film. The world must be crying out for one." Well, that's sorted then. Now the comedy duo just need to decide which one wears the black plastic-rimmed glasses and who's got the short fat hairy legs. 🌀