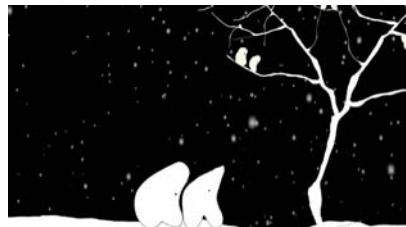




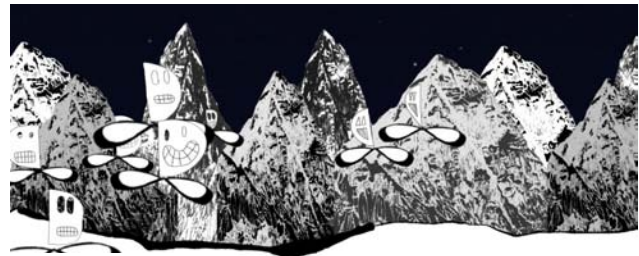
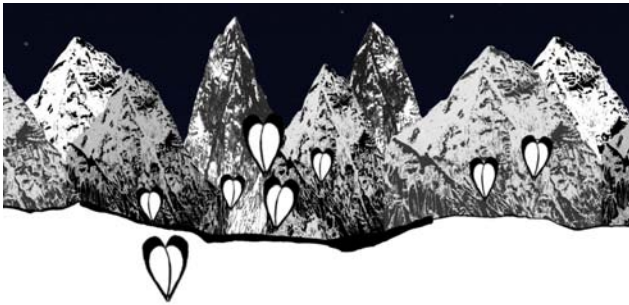
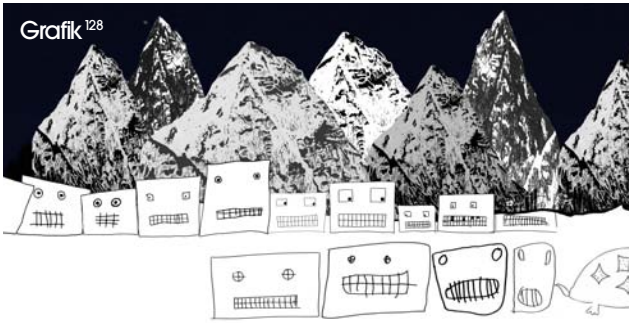
In-Flight Entertainment.

Chinese whispers has been taken to a whole new level in the hands of Caroline Melis and Susanne Flender, who travelled from Brighton to Aberdeen to collect images from 1,000 people and create an enchanting animation. Angharad Lewis met them to hear the tale of *As the Crow Flies...*



The most pressing problem for artists Carolina Melis and Susanne Flender at the moment is how the 1,000-strong list of contributors will fit on the credit sequence of their animated film *As the Crow Flies*. The film was commissioned by Channel 4 as part of its Animate season and has seen Melis and Flender undertake an epic road trip around Britain to collect material. At the end of 2004 they travelled from Brighton to Aberdeen asking people to join in with a game of visual Chinese whispers, which they have transformed into a captivating five-minute animation.

As well as clocking up hundreds of miles across Britain, *As the Crow Flies* also resulted in a visual journey through scores of sketchbooks. It all began with a workshop at the Design Museum in London and a simple line drawing of a bird by Melis. This was shown to the first participant for five seconds, after which they were asked to redraw what they had seen from memory. The second participant then saw Person One's drawing and repeated the process. And so on until men, women and children from up and down the country had contributed to the ever-evolving drawing. The results are quite amazing. From that initial drawing of a bird almost every conceivable shape emerged. Tiny changes in the way each person remembered and interpreted the previous drawing became amplified by successive reinterpretations. Melis's original bird is quickly lost and new shapes emerge. At times the drawing becomes totally abstract and then gradually returns to something figurative. There is even a moment where the drawing dissolves into a numerical equation.



Melis recalls her and Flender's fears before the project began—they were worried the drawing would degenerate into a circle and thus end in rather dull fashion. But in the event they were delighted by the diversity of shapes and images participants produced. At the very first workshop it quickly became clear that things were going to be interesting. The participants were a mixture of parents and children. At one stage some marks on the drawing became tears, and the bird was soon weeping buckets. "Suddenly tears appeared," Melis recalls, "then eventually you only have the tears. There was a little four-year-old, she deconstructed this image into just tears and then the whole thing becomes something else entirely."

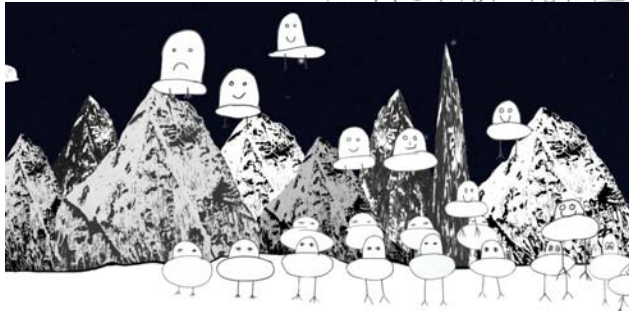
Melis and Flender planned their trip in detail but there were many surprises along the way. They wrote to venues in advance asking for a quiet corner in which to conduct the drawing sessions. "We were drawn to places where people had a connection either with travelling or with the town itself or something to do with birds," says Flender. Among the places they visited were Edinburgh Zoo, Brighton Museum, Durham Cathedral and the RSPB centre just outside Birmingham. This was the scene for one of their most enjoyable drawing sessions. "We set up a table and asked visitors to make a drawing," Melis describes. "There were lots of people coming in, mainly men in their sixties and seventies—people who didn't really have much experience of drawing but who were very good at observing. They spent ages trying to recreate the drawing that was, at this stage, virtually a circle. They were so enthusiastic and started looking at each other's drawings and comparing the details—it was quite amazing."

As well as prearranged locations for drawing workshops, Melis and Flender stopped people in the street, where it was a little harder to persuade them to take part. "Maybe 50 per cent of people would join in," says Flender. "It totally depended where we were. In a café or cinema people were relaxed but if you stop people in the street they're not so willing to be approached."

One of the most fascinating revelations of the experiment was the extent of the leaps of imagination that occurred when people memorised the image. At one stage the drawing evolved into a simple smiley face. Then suddenly in the following drawing it had become an unhappy face.

Once the Grand Tour was over, the business of turning all the drawings into an animated film began. Melis and Flender resisted the obvious idea of creating an animation that simply showed one drawing morphing into the next. Instead they wanted to develop a narrative from the dramatis personae of shapes, characters and symbols that had emerged. They also wanted to convey a sense of journey to reflect their own experience of the project.





"We wanted to make a creative version of the experiment," says Flender, "an animation which is based more on the journey and create a landscape out of that."

"The idea with the animation was to develop a narrative out of all these drawings—not to replicate the process," explains Melis. "So sometimes we give lots of time to one drawing, sometimes we group lots of drawings together. We are just trying to recall a sense of journey as well as the sequence of the drawings."

The trip—and the project as a whole—was made possible by the support Melis and Flender received from various sponsors including the Arts Council, Virgin Trains (who provided them with first-class rail tickets), Stabilo (who supplied 4,000 pens for contributors to use and keep) and Secwhite (who provided the paper). The music for the animation was composed by friend and collaborator Metronomy. Which just goes to show that the best way to get that all-important (and often so elusive) funding is to seek it on the back of an irresistible idea. As the Crow Flies is successful thanks to the simplicity of the idea behind it, the fact that it is so inclusive of people from all walks of life and locations (regardless of their artistic interests or abilities) and the sheer hard work put in by Melis and Flender to gather the raw components and transform them into a beautiful animation. Those 1,000 participants who contributed to As the Crow Flies can enjoy the fact that they are a part of a successful art project that will be enjoyed by millions more. As the Crow Flies will be screened on Channel 4 in autumn 2005.

