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"Artist Interview—Superstrumps: the Card Game with a Mission"

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SUPERSTRUMPS

THE CARD GAME WITH A MISSION

SYD MOORE AND HEIDI WIGMORE IN
CONVERSATION WITH OLUYINKA ESAN,
UNIVERSITY OF WINCHESTER
MARCH 2012

The artist interview in this dossier is an example of collaborative work between an artist and a writer. It is a showcase of how popular culture can be re-appropriated. The interviewees are the co-creators of the card game *Superstrumps* developed to address the issue of stereotyping of women. In the interview, they recount the process of creating the game involving other women from their local community. This exemplifies how a strategy for resisting and reclaiming identities undermined by negative labelling is developed. Their views are strongly shaped by their feminist principles. The interview acknowledges the complex nature of identities, the challenge of media representation and the symbiotic relationship between media and audiences is revealed.

L'entretien dans ce dossier illustre bien le potentiel des collaborations entre artistes et écrivains. On y voit comment la culture populaire peut être réappropriée. Les participants ont créé ensemble le jeu de cartes *Superstrumps* afin d'aborder la question des stéréotypes sur les femmes. Dans l'entretien ils reviennent sur le processus de création du jeu dans lequel des femmes de leur communauté locale se sont impliquées, et à travers lequel a été mise en place une stratégie de réappropriation des identités dévaluées par des représentations négatives. Leur point de vue est fortement influencé par leurs principes féministes. L'entretien tient compte de la nature multiple des identités et du défi posé par les représentations médiatiques ; au bout du compte c'est la relation symbiotique entre les médias et leurs audiences qui émerge.

Playing cards have long been a pastime in much of the world. Their earliest incarnations have been traced to China, but cards have travelled and morphed in their appearance since then. Once made like chips in China and then appearing as circular shapes in India, cards as we know them are products of European countries (Spain, Italy, and France). They have been a popular source of entertainment since the 14th Century and have been adopted for varied uses—diverse folk games, gambling, divination, and fortune telling. Cards have also been adopted for educational purposes and for sales promotion. Complexity of production and high cost may have restricted patronage in earlier times, as is evident in the vestiges of court life seen in standard packs—representations of king, queen, jack (knave), and the joker. With improved technology, the aesthetics of cards have improved. Mass production has helped to make playing cards more affordable and therefore more widely available. Under registered trademarks like Top Trumps (UK), and Bicycle (USA), some playing cards feature diverse representations of life in contemporary cultures. They are even collectible. Some corporations customise playing cards to promote particular brands and issues. Since social marketing also employs tactics used in product marketing, it is little wonder that Syd Moore, a writer and media lecturer, and Heidi Wigmore, a visual artist and lecturer, elected to design playing cards as a medium to address the labelling of women—stereotyping, one of society’s perennial concerns. They conceived

of the game, developed the cards, and brought it to public attention through events within their locality in Essex and then to the 2011 Women of the World (WoW) Festival in London’s Southbank Arts Centre. However, being featured on *Woman’s Hour* on BBC Radio 4 is perhaps what brought them national attention.



Fig. 1

In this interview these two creative women, Syd Moore and Heidi Wigmore meet with me in Essex, England around Syd’s kitchen table. They describe the process of developing the *Superstrumps* project, discuss the rationale behind the initiative, the process of selecting the labels for the characters featured in the game—through whom we explore some mother-figures—and appraise the success of their mission; is it being accomplished? Throughout this interview we are able to share in the empirical experiences of these women

who have been able to use the media for specified ends: to push back against established female stereotypes.

Superstrumps is the registered trademark for their playing cards meant for two or more players. The cards are dealt evenly among players. Unlike the standard pack, which has four suits, it features thirty socially recognisable (female) characters, each carrying labels used to type women. Each card outlines special powers that the character can boast of, as well as a range of other labels by which they may be known. These labels highlight particular behaviour traits to which its bearers are reduced. Each card (character) has numerical vale. This is computed based on scores assigned to attributes associated with women, though more essentially with motherhood – Nurture, Strength, Independence and Resourcefulness. The numerical values for each of these allow players to compare the hand they are dealt, by so doing, determine who wins the game. Many of the tropes featured in the game have historically defined women, and in many cases continue to do so. As stereotypes tend to do, the labels carry negative connotations, but *Superstrumps* co-creators call on players to “have fun, reclaim the labels, and ‘trump the mass media’s tunnel-visioned perceptions of women everywhere!”

The underlying mission of *Superstrumps* is to provoke deep reflection and talking points on the labels with which women are tagged. The cards provide opportunities to challenge

and renegotiate existing values and by implication review the balance of power in gender relations. The game has focused attention on the need to reclaim the negative stereotypes that have hitherto robbed women of their esteem in society. Born out of some form of an ethnographic research process—even if the creators don’t acknowledge it as such—the game can be adopted as the basis for comparative studies of women’s experiences in different cultures and societies. Similar strategies can also be used to support a range of practical efforts aimed at tackling social exclusion of vulnerable women in particular, but also more generally. Wigmore and Moore also see the wider prospects for employing similar play and humour based collaborative strategies in tackling other forms of social injustices beyond those confronting women. The merit of *Superstrumps* cannot be measured by its very modest commercial success, rather by the wider application of its principle, which allow players a chance to reflect on the social conditions that allow for the perpetuation of traditional and ultimately limiting female stereotypes. In this battle of wits, where they are pitched against widely-circulated media representations of women, the creators of *Superstrumps* may yet hold the trump card.

Here is the story of *Superstrumps* as told to Oluyinka Esan (OE), by its creators Heidi Wigmore (HW) and Syd Moore (SM).

* * *

OE: Why do you think the mass media are responsible for the particular imaginings of women that *Superstrumps* seeks to reclaim?

HW: As a visual artist I am very aware of how powerful visual culture is in impacting people's perception of the world and of themselves—advertising, most of all. It is visual culture bombardment, as I perceive it, from the mass media. Consider how advertising images construct female identity, because women's images are used to sell absolutely everything. The prevalence of women's images in the visual mass media has been noted since I was at school; certainly the practice has become more pervasive in the last two or three decades.

I am sure Syd will give more details on this but, having both been lecturers in tertiary education, we became increasingly aware of the impact of the media through our young female students. In the context of Fine Art we were finding a majority of female students wanting to work on projects about eating disorders and body image, and they were themselves making the connections between that and the world of media and advertising.

SM: Consider some of the known practices during the great age of television [1950s through to the early 1980s]. As an author of ghost stories, I am quite interested in Rod Serling, who was a civil activist and also the creator of *The Twilight Zone* [1959-1964]. My research revealed that some of his

frustrations were with not being able to represent racism in the American South, or focus on women's issues. These limitations were not necessarily imposed by the TV networks, but by the advertisers and the sponsors of the programmes. They would actually read the scripts and delete anything controversial. If you had a woman in a specific role, something beyond the domestic environment, they would change that. I think this kind of shaping hasn't stopped.

There is an idea that TV reflects society. It doesn't. It reflects what the patriarchy or those in control want us to say and want us to aspire to. Consumer culture has created what we see on screens today and definitely in magazines as well.

When I was lecturing in Publishing I had to tell my students about such issues. Take the case of *Cosmopolitan*, which was going to publish an issue in the 90s on anorexia. It was pulled because of Versace, who was then going through the heroin-chic fashion style. That particular piece was pulled to keep the advertising. When you tell students this, they are shocked and they can't believe it. But as you start to reveal and draw attention to the business machinations behind media processes, students begin to realise how manipulated the public is. And certainly women's images are incredibly manipulated.

When I was researching the Essex witch-hunts, for my latest novel *Witch Hunt* (2012), one of the books I read

was *The Age of Sex Crime* (1987). The author, Jane Caputi, draws parallels between the 16th and 17th-century witch hunts and 20th-century advertising, suggesting that the ideologies of the witch hunt continue to surround us in new forms—one manifestation being advertising images of women as victims, bound and gagged, tortured, even surrounded by flames, which she links to the witch-hunts, and to the continued sexualisation and demonization of women to sell products to women.

OE: So it seems that women's images have forever been exploited in one way or the other, in different time periods, regardless of which visual medium has been privileged?

SM: Yes, I would say so.

HW: Yes I would say absolutely. From my point of view, the inter-relationship between art and advertising is a key element in understanding 20th-century constructions of female beauty and identity. Certain feminist artists have attempted to revise, take back, and re-appropriate the female body, but it seems that the female form in advertising—as far as I am concerned—has not been reclaimed, which I suppose is where *Superstrumps* comes in.

OE: Do you mean that advertising in the 20th Century keeps going back to those images, those signifiers that people can relate to? Signifiers that can re-echo images that people are familiar with, but which then seem to perpetuate those “errors” that had been made in

representing women in the past?

SM & HW: Yes!

SM: And that's what we are trying to do with *Superstrumps*, really. We want to literally say, “Stop! Let's look at these and let's reclaim them.” Take the Essex girl.

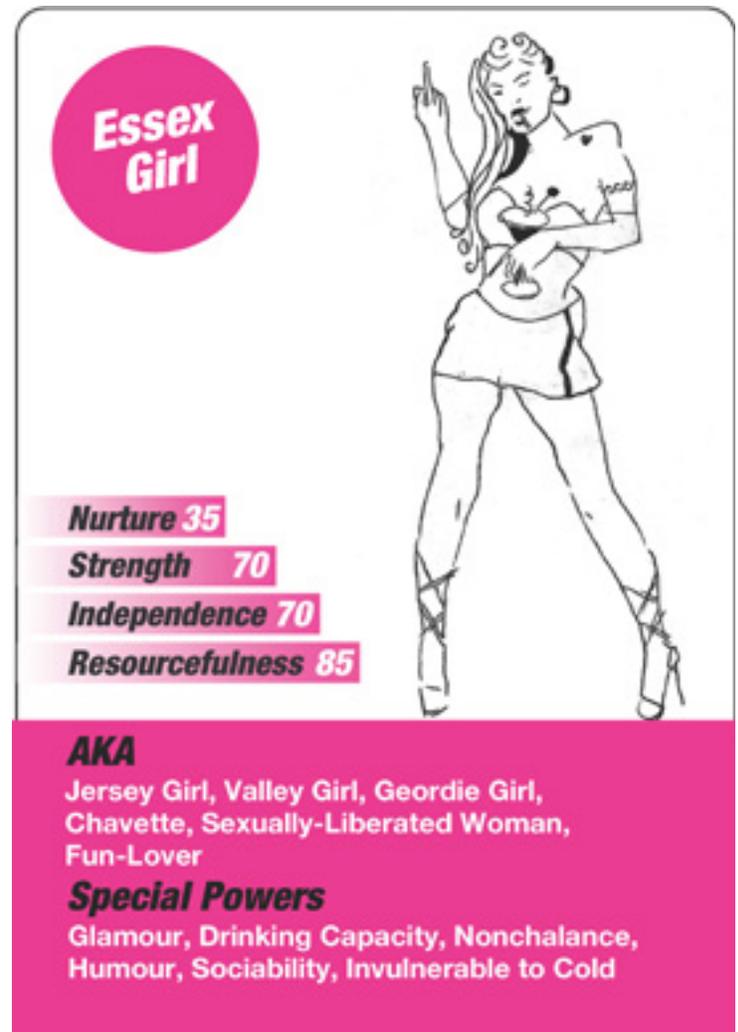


Fig. 2

The Essex girl as a stereotype is an 80s concept—the unintelligent promiscuous girl of the late-20th Century. But the definition of ‘extremely promiscuous’ is a matter of semantics! I’d hope

that socially we have moved on from that. We are in the 21st century now. Is she promiscuous or can we say she is sexually liberated? You know, it's the way you want to look at it, and *Superstrumps* is about saying "No!" to these consistent echoes, these consistent stereotypes, which follow women around. It's about reconstructing them.

OE: I suppose the other thing you are doing when you highlight the Essex girl is to call attention to other tropes. You are saying, let's look beyond Essex, and see how widespread this type of labelling can be found. Could this stereotype not be applied to someone anywhere else?

SM: Yeah, like the Jersey girl.

OE: We seem to blame the media for selling us these ideas, but how culpable is the family, since it is the primary socialising institution? How culpable is that institution in further entrenching these images?

SM: Very, unfortunately. But going back just briefly to media theory, consider the Uses and Gratifications model versus the Frankfurt School's Hypodermic Needle model of media influence. In the 50s it was all about the hypodermic needle. One school of thought was that people were sponges, and the media, the hypodermic needle, would just inject ideas and images for people to think about and people would pick them up. Then there was the Uses and Gratifications theory, which looked at how people used media—how they interacted with the media. Some

people use it for one thing and some for another. I think there is evidence of both these theories in practice. In terms of the "Hypodermic", we don't have subliminal advertising over here in the UK, but we have constant repetition. Advertising messages quickly become familiar. So if people become familiar with seeing women advertising domestic products in the context of the kitchen, nobody who sees adverts like that then stops to say, "How dare you?" anymore because we are so familiar with it. At the same time, we do pick and choose. Everybody picks and chooses. Again, it's about awareness. It's about being aware of what you are seeing.

As a mother I think it's really important to articulate and to discuss these kinds of things with my son. Last Thursday, I woke him up with "Happy International Women's Day!" So we talked about it all the way to school, and I said, "If you had to draw a picture today, to celebrate the achievements of women, what would you draw?" He said, "I think I would draw a woman going to bed early." And I said, "Really?" And he said, "Yes. You always say if you go to bed early, it's an achievement."

OE, HW, SM: [*Laughter.*]

SM: Then I thought: "Well, actually, yeah." And then I said, "What about women doing something really great, what would they do?" Then he said, "Well they could be a doctor," and I said, "Excellent." And then I said, "How about a woman Prime Minister?" And he went, "Don't be silly, only men are

prime ministers!”

HW: That means we have a lot more work to do.

SM: Yet he’s my son!

OE: How old is he?

SM: He’s just turned 9. So I actually said, “Woo, there has got to be a change. But that’s what he’s picked up from the images and cultural messages in his environment.

HW: What I would say to this is that I have a massive issue with the media. My issue is the fact that we have no choice and we are bombarded with visual images, and we know that our conscious state is a minute fraction of our being. The unconscious is far, far, far greater than the conscious. So my issue is the subliminal absorption of this sort of constant drip feed of constructions of identity, that are not around and are projected on to us, and I think it’s become particularly insidious for the generation of kids that are just now coming of age.

My son has just turned 18. When I come across statistics about the amount of hard-core pornography, the violent images and the violence towards women, that boys of my son’s age will have seen and that has been and is easily available to them now via media-technology, compared to a generation ago when boys would share a dirty magazine in a school yard—sorry to use that cliché—the contrast completely horrifies me.

And what horrifies me more is our powerlessness in intercepting these pervasive messages. I can do nothing about it. I can’t stop him seeing this stuff. And, I know he has seen it because they all have, and they have done so from a very young age. We don’t yet know what damage this is doing to young minds.

OE: And where would they have seen this stuff?

HW: On the Internet. You might try to control that at home, but you can’t control what they are seeing elsewhere, and it’s so very easily accessible to them.

SM: This is something Heidi talked about at the WoW [Women of the World 2011] festival: how what’s seen as soft porn is now easily accessed in these lads’ mags, publications like *Nuts*, *FHM*. A few years ago, when my son had started to get out of his pram, these magazines were not on the top shelf. They were at his eye level. He and my nephew used to laugh when they saw a naked lady. They would laugh and say, “Look!” Now they don’t. These are familiar sights to children. It’s become the norm to see images like that in the media.

OE: So what you’ve done with *Superstrumps* — having appraised the mediascape and recognised the problem—is that you have created opportunities for dialogues, for chats with children, or with other members of a family. Was that why you opted to create the card game?

HW: That's a really interesting point. Actually, presenting the whole issue as a game is a careful path that we've trod. For it to be a game, which it is, suggests that it is fun and frivolous and having a laugh. But actually, some very serious issues are presented. I think we agreed right from the beginning that the game form would take it to spaces and places where these debates would not necessarily be had, and people might not even realise that through playing the game they were actually engaging with these issues.

SM: So it opens the debates.

HW: Yeah! We also found early on that there is an arena through play; there's an open space there. And of course it means that even quite young kids, within a safe context, can play this game at a very basic level of just playing the game and looking at the images. The level with which you engage with the game depends on your interest, your education, your understanding, and your awareness.

SM: We really didn't want to be preachy. We both feel that if people start telling us what to do and preaching at us, we are likely to be defiant or just walk off. So to open the subject of representation up to as many people as possible, we wanted to make it engaging.

HW: I grew up with 80s feminism—what some might consider hard-core radical stuff. I did my first degree in the 80s, and feminists from that era were and are sometimes accused of being overly

strident. I can totally understand. I was also like that. Sometimes it doesn't take much for me to get like that again. But I have come to recognise through certain female artists, for example Sarah Lucas, that there is an awful lot of power in humour and playfulness. And, actually, Syd and I are both humorous women. [laughter]

SM: We like to have a laugh!

HW: The people of Essex, not just the Essex girls have a good sense of humour. [laughter] And there is a particular sense of humour here in Essex that we have tapped into—both of us being from this area.

The aesthetics of *Superstrumps* is like the 1970s' girls' magazine, which is revealing. Those 70s girls' magazine were full of attitude, loads of attitude, declaring as it were that: "We're going to go out there and have some fun. We're going to do stuff. Nothing's going to stop us from doing what we want to do. We're loud, we're proud, we're colourful!"

SM: But then again, I think also in the 70s a lot of feminism, and the way feminism was discussed, was kind of alienating for a lot of women—certainly in the 60s as well. It alienated the housewives.

HW: It was very middle-class, very white middle-class.

SM: It alienated the working class as well. This *Superstrumps* initiative is

about trying to engage a broad audience, about being inclusive and just saying, “Come and have a laugh.” “It’s funny.” “Come and join in.”

OE: So, if it is as you have said, that anybody—regardless of class, age, race, nationality—can bring any number of responses to the game, is there a way that these could be collated and compared, as a way to assess the concerns different groups bring to the issues surrounding women’s representation?

HW: Well, one thing is that the whole project came together through the direct responses of women. We hosted an event. We put out an open call to women of all ages, through social networking, through email and through the local paper, to invite them to come to this event. There, we presented attendees with the idea that we had for this game. We provided visual images stereotyping different kinds of women taken from the mass media. We asked the participants to respond in a couple of ways. We gave them some time to just wander around the space to look at the images and to make responses on post-it notes. We encouraged them to write down whatever they wanted to say about these images. The reactions were very raw and very immediate and that had an influence on the images that I, as the artist on the project, ended up choosing and appropriating for these different types. We also asked the women to actually give numerical values to various attributes, which are . . .

SM: Nurture, Strength, Independence, Resourcefulness. And basically we said to them, “If 50 is the average, score the character on each of these attributes going higher or lower than the average.”

HW: We gave them the stereotypes that we had been working with as a list, but without the images in that instance. They were working in small groups around tables, and we had loads of wine; it was very, very loud. We were completely blown away by the women’s level of engagement and their very strong opinions about the way they were being represented. They really wanted to talk and there were some who were quite adamant, getting into fierce heated debates. We collected their feedback and the rankings they had given the various labels. The numerical grading was especially contentious because we had asked each small group to offer a numerical value for each of the different stereotypes. Things got really, really tricky thereafter. Getting a consensus on the final numerical value to use was tricky, yet we needed the numerical ranks for the activity that gets players actively involved in the game. That said, the ranking activity remains one of the more peripheral aspects of the game. What’s most crucial to our ultimate mission are the images and the special powers and the AKAs (the also known as). We realised early on that there were all manner of other labels that could be placed onto each stereotype, terms that are cultural and context specific, which is where the AKAs comes in. [*Superstrumps* character chart].

OE: Did the women help you with that?

SM: Yes they did—a smaller group of interested parties.

HW: We had a brainstorming exercise. Four of us from Essex, while on a train journey, tried to work out just how many female stereotypes we could think of. In an hour we came up with over 250!

SM: Just four women on an hour's journey!

HW: You try it for men and you are struggling to get over 20. So that was one of the reasons we came up with the AKAs, because we realise that some of the names overlap with each other.

SM: So the early process was a very complex activity. We felt that we were treading through a minefield. We found some women, one or two women friends, who very early on, felt very, very uncomfortable with what we were doing.

OE: Why was that?

HW: Because we were dealing with stereotypes.

SM: Their fear was that we were promoting stereotypes. That we would be propagating stereotypes by using them in the game.

HW: For instance, The Strumpet, its AKA is The Bad Girl, Slag, Slut, Bike,

Hussy, Slapper, as in Tart, Trollop, Scarlet Woman, Floozy, Lush. So obviously we are dealing with these really spiteful, very negative terminologies. But it was like lancing a boil: get everything out!

SM: We didn't want to shy away from those words because they are out there.

HW: Yes, because they are difficult to tackle. But then again, the whole thing was about looking through the stereotypes to the positive qualities that are masked, but you have to go the whole way. Some of our friends felt so uncomfortable using this terminology.

OE: Do you think the 30 characters are adequate in representing women?

HW & SM: No.

OE: So the AKAs actually expand the range of characters that can be included in the game?

HW: There could be so many more but we had to bring it down to 30 because of the logistics of making it a pack of cards and making it a game.

SM: And of course the more we got into this, the more we realised what a huge subject it was, and this can only ever be a kind of very early prototype. Actually, we just saw this as a launch pack.

We launched this project at the WoW festival, which was a fairly diverse crowd of middle-class women. What we discovered very quickly was that

a whole series of other kinds of cards was required. We have started working on the teenage pack. We have already started going into schools. We had a fantastic fact-finding afternoon where we asked young people to give us the stereotypes used for women in their generation. We opened this up to boys and girls to gain access to the teenage stereotypes and terminology.

We also had some really great conversations at WoW with women of colour and women from other cultures. Far from feeling alienated by this pack—which was one of our concerns—they were inspired and energised. We found ourselves saying we'd like to have other packs come out of this. We spent time talking to other women and asking them to tell us about the stereotypes from their cultures. We would not necessarily have come across some of the labels mentioned.

And the teens—they spoke another language. We had such a laugh! We'd never heard of most of the labels. And what we very quickly realised is that stereotypes are not only specific to different cultures but also to the subcultures within those groups. So, perhaps there will be more to come.

And we have always wanted to create an international pack.

HW: We do, yes. We've had women from other parts of the world who come across us through the website. They've emailed us from places all over the world. We write back saying, "Oh

yes, tell us the names that get thrown around." And that's been really fun to hear. I say fun, but some of them are shocking. Then there are the similarities, aren't there?

OE: Aha, that's a point I'd been wondering about. How universal are these tropes, these types that you've identified?

HW: That's tricky to answer at this stage. One thing is that being an artist I am interested in archetypes, and obviously the archetype is historic and embedded in culture. In this pack of stereotypes, you've got the ancient archetypes, so we've got the virgin, the whore, the mother and so on. I will suggest that in most cultures these archetypes exist and therefore stereotypes come out of those.

SM: From the feedback that we've had, largely from Europeans, we know that a wide audience of people can relate to many of the stereotypes featured in *Superstrumps*. If you get into Asia or other continents, I think you will uncover loads of stereotypes, but I am not sure they are going to be the same as those that we are familiar with.

OE: It might be fascinating to see how the gaps close around some of these representations that we find. It might just be that there are more similarities than differences in the experiences or prejudices against women. To be more precise, it would be interesting to see the comparison in the experiences of mothers around the world.

SM: That would be really interesting.

OE: This game also provides an opportunity for dialogue and a tool—even a research tool—for others to assess what is going on in different areas of the world. So, yes! Well done for getting this conversation going.

Shall we now look at some of the cards and the types you've created? I see some of them have been labelled as mums.

HW: Yes there are, yes!

OE: Which ones are these?

SM: There's a Yummy Mummy, The Single Mum . . .

HW: Earth Mother.



Fig. 4



Fig. 3



Fig. 5

SM: A lot of the others, as well. I would say The Battle Axe was probably a mother at some point.

HW: She is assumed to be. As for The Super Woman, one of her AKAs is Working Mum. But a lot of the other stereotypes, well, we don't know whether they are mothers or not. [*Holds up another card.*] This, The Ballbreaker might well be.

SM: I think a lot of them are wives. I think The Ballbreaker is definitely a wife, because to be a ballbreaker she has to break someone's balls [*laughter*].

OE: I think The Cougar could be a mother.

SM: Yeah, The Cougar could be, yeah.

HW: Interestingly, some of them are very resolutely single, aren't they? The Bunny Boiler, she's definitely single. Ice Queen. Essex Girl is single. It's funny, I have never thought about them like that before. This is a different way of thinking about them. Have you thought of them like that before?

SM: No.

OE: And I suppose you could think of The Blue Stocking?

SM: The thing is, quite a few of them could be mothers. The Strumpet and The Career Woman could be. The Stepford Wife could be. The Spinster's not, but The Grande Dame could be.

OE: How about The Old Biddy?

SM: Yes, The Old Biddy could be someone's mum.

HW: And Grandmother.

SM: Yes, exactly, The Feminist as well.

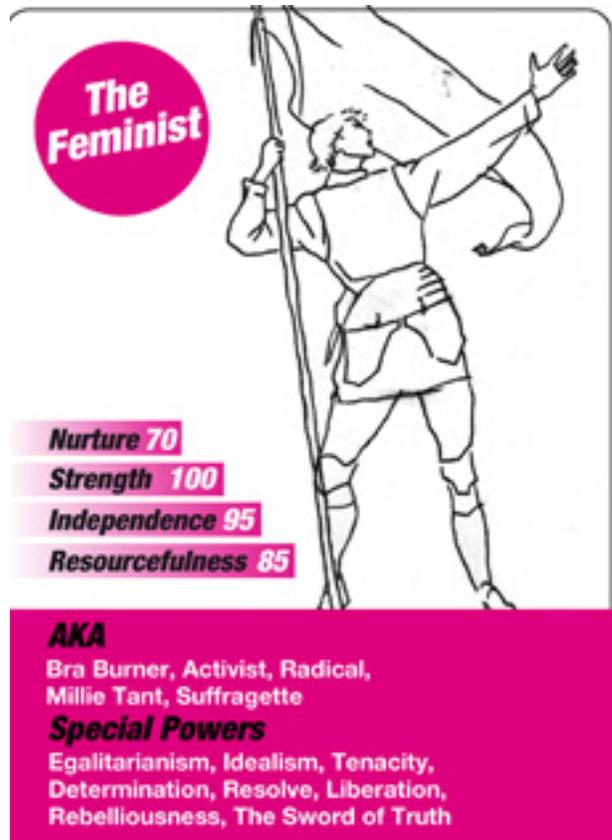


Fig. 6

There are a few that are definitely not, but The Bull Dyke could be a mum as well.

OE: And The Drudge?

HW: Oh yeah.

SM: I think The Drudge is probably a mum, to be honest.

[HW: *Laughter*]

OE: Why do you say that?

SM: She's just been looking after everybody.

OE: She's the carer.

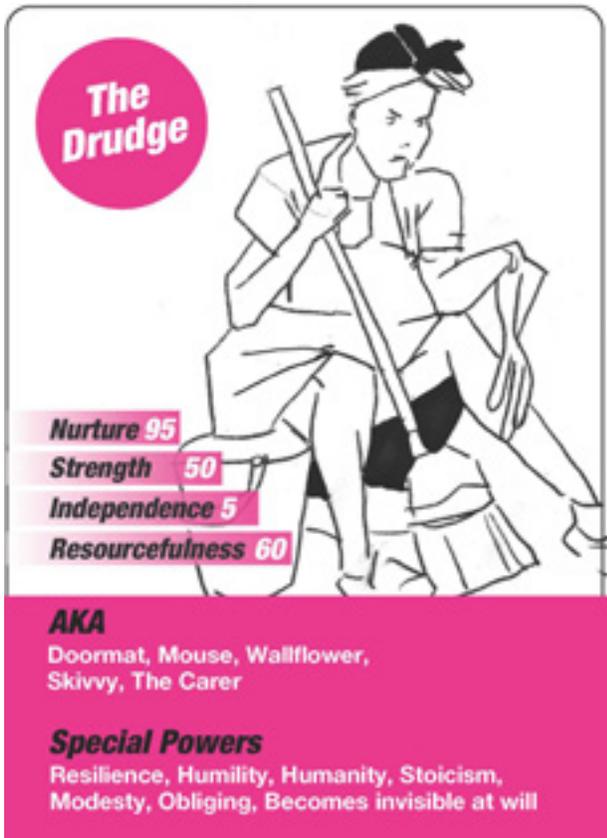


Fig. 7

HW: She's one of the most interesting cards, isn't she? She has been for us. We've talked about her a lot because she really is at the bottom of the pile. We had this stereotype and we had these big contentious considerations—"Can we use this? I mean we can't have The Drudge? What can we do? This is dreadful." And then we started thinking about her and what she is. And we just very naturally decided that she's called

The Drudge because she's actually busy caring for other people, all day long and all night. So she's cleaning. She's caring. So if she's caring for other people, why is she at the bottom of the pile? Let's raise her. And when we asked women to rate her, there were some big conversations around, "Well this woman is a caregiver, and that is a very noble thing. She's actually putting her own life aside to care for other people. Why is that not respected?"

SM: There is nobility in her sacrifice, as well. She's actually got very strong statistics. When the workshop participants ranked her, she came out with a score of 95 for nurture. That's really high. And also in Heidi's drawing, look at her, this is the point that 'the Marigolds come off'. She's actually [saying], (*demonstrating the resolute posture in the drawing*) "Right, I'm going to stop here for a moment." [see image of The Drudge]

HW: All women immediately recognise—without us having to explain—that none of us are stereotypes: no one woman fits in a single box with a label on it. By contrast, we can, all of us, pick up a handful of cards at any time of our life, in fact in any one day, and see aspects of ourselves in those stereotypes. We've had jokes before, Syd and I. I'll ask, "How are you?" and she reply, "Oh, I'm a Drudge this morning, but this afternoon, I'm going to be a Ballbreaker, and by the evening a Femme Fatale." So it's become a running joke, really. Essentially these are all just different aspects of very

complex female identities.

SM: Of course now we do quite flippantly use these terms. When you say, “I am a ‘Drudge’” what you’re saying, is: “I get spent! Ninety five percent caring for everybody else in the house.” Then, you could say, “This afternoon I’m not going to be caring. I’m going to get out there. I’m going to do something different, and then this evening, I’m going to be sexual.”

HW: And if we meet in the evening and Syd’s wearing too much lipstick, I feel quite free to tell her she’s looking like a complete Strumpet.

SM: Which I really celebrate. I love it. I celebrate that because, if she calls me a Strumpet, I know that I am [*and she begins reading from the qualities listed on the Strumpet’s card*] “defiant, generous, liberated sexually, self-determined, and I have loads of charisma.”

OE: So what you’re doing is, in a fun way, reclaiming the positive aspects of those labels by which we have been known and saying to women that indeed it’s all right and inevitable to be a little bit of all of these things at the same time.

SM: And also, part of the purpose of the game is to make women feel positive about these labels: to be able to reclaim these identity tropes and to have a retort, have good reason to celebrate what they are doing.

HW: Absolutely! And the response is in the special powers. They are the most important aspects of the cards, aren’t they? We thought long and hard, we really did, and we worked so hard with the language. We really focused on creating positive attributes—special powers—for every single one of these characters, no matter how denigrated they are in common cultural discourse. In other words—empower them!

OE: Which seems to be the entire aim of the movement—the feminist movement—let’s empower the women, not just for the sake of the women, but for the sake of society as a whole.

SM: Absolutely!

OE: If you had to pick one card to represent women at this stage in time, which would it be?

SM: I’d probably go for The Essex Girl. For me, in the climate that we are in at the moment, I’d pick The Essex Girl to represent women’s condition. She’s denigrated. She’s seen as a sex object. She’s put down and she’s held down through class hierarchies—she’s perceived as low class. This stereotype is imprisoning. However, in response, she is defiant. And actually this is how I see, or hope, women are at this stage—that they are defiant! That they are coming out like the image Heidi has used to represent the Essex Girl—with one finger in the air, saying, “I don’t care what you think, I am going to do my own thing.” Women are starting to come out of the kitchen, to speak out.

That's what The Essex Girl is about. The Essex Girl calls us back. She plays hard. She works hard. She's sassy and she's sociable. She's still denigrated but she's doing her own thing with pride!

OE: Go Essex Girl!

[*Laughter*]

HW: I would feel duty bound to pick The Feminist. We are all talking about reclaiming the *F-word*. The number of strong young females I meet, who in everything they are saying and doing, as far as I am concerned, are proclaiming their feminism, but then they say, "Oh but I'm not a feminist." That's quite tricky for my generation. I think that's really sad that young women are no longer interested in exploring feminism. But again, of course, maybe it's just a label. Maybe we don't need that label anymore, if we just remind ourselves of what we determined the special powers are for The Feminist—egalitarianism, idealism, tenacity, determination, resolve, liberation, rebelliousness, The Sword of Truth.

We had a great conversation with Bidisha, the writer and broadcaster, at WoW 2011. She was talking about Joan of Arc and interestingly I had used an iconic image of Joan of Arc from the early 1930 or 1940s movie as inspiration when I was designing the image of The Feminist. I considered what to use. A bra burner? That is out of date. So, Joan of Arc, looking very cool in a suit of armour and a breastplate, seemed more appropriate. She's holding a banner, she's got her hand raised in the air, she's a revolutionary in this image.

And Bidisha was saying Joan of Arc had been claimed by the Christians as a Christian symbol, but Bidisha didn't see it that way. She said Joan was just a very clever, very sassy young woman, who realised that if she said she was hearing voices from God, she'd be given a suit of armour. Bidisha said, "Who knows if she was really hearing voices from God or not?" But Joan used that as a way to supersede the limitations placed on her by the patriarchal rulers of her day. I thought that was a brilliant take on Joan of Arc. My only reticence about using Joan of Arc had been that she was this very Christian icon and that didn't fit with the agenda of the game.

OE: I thought maybe you would have selected The Drudge. Even though we celebrate The Drudge, we know that that's where we started from, but you're saying The Essex Girl and The Feminist better represent where women are now. So there is evidence of some progress.

SM: The thing is, maybe The Essex Girl and The Feminist are our generation, but I think if you ask my mum, she might actually choose The Drudge.

HW: Yes, it might be a matter of generation. Feminists in the 70s were asking for equality—equality of pay, equality of opportunity. You could say if you wanted to be slightly controversial about it, The Essex Girl does embody those two things. She's got disposable income, earns her own money, she does as she wants, is very threatening, of course, and she's sexually active. She expresses her sexuality, she drinks like a man [*laughter*], she has fun like a man.

In many ways, isn't that what feminists were asking for? I'm not saying I necessarily hold that position.

OE: So there has been some ground shifting, which brings me to the last section where we consider how well the *Superstrumps* mission has been accomplished. It seems to me that you have managed to generate some support for the game, some high-profile champions. Do you want to talk about that?

HW: Our greatest champion has been Jude Kelly, the Artistic Director at the Southbank Arts Centre, London.

SM: We've had a fantastic response, which has been really overwhelming. I mean, that we've been able to attract the attention of Camilla, Duchess of Cornwall, is fantastic. But also, we've had responses from people like Lynne Franks, Annie Lennox, Bidisha, Jenny Murray, and Maggie Semple. Kathy Lette has been a right champion. She took the cards with her on to a peak-time television show and she wore our rosettes saying Feminist.

HW: Shami Chakrabarti, Director of Liberty, and Rosie Boycott, who were early-wave feminists in this country—early 70s.

SM: Yes, the cards have gone down fantastically well. We have lots of celebrity champions and well-wishers. Just shows you that these people, who you think, "God, you're at the top of your trade," people who you think,

"They must have achieved it," still see this as really important to push. Obviously they are still experiencing prejudice as well, so they want to move the game forwards.

HW: We've had some conversations around this game possibly being used as a tool in raising awareness about domestic violence.

SM: Well, not just raising awareness, but actually having victims of domestic violence playing it. So there is no judgement about them, but actually getting them to have some fun and to look at the stereotypes and reclaim those stereotypes that had been used to label them. Maybe get the rosettes to improve their self-esteem as well, just get them to be positive about the stereotypes that they had lived with.

OE: So the cards become a means to get them to see where they've been and what positive values they can take away from these; to help people move on without regret. Do you foresee any danger of a backlash to the *Superstrumps* and the strategy informing it?

SM: Sometimes what we are doing is really challenging to people and they become frightened. They see the images and become worried that the game will encourage a new breed of women. Perhaps men of a certain generation are quite fearful. They don't want the status quo changing because it has been good to them. And that's where we come in and rock the boat.

This reminds me of something that happened at End of Term, which is another festival that evolved as an aspect of *Superstrumps*, where we actually had women dress up in different fancy dresses to create new superheroes. We'd then photograph them. I was The Essax, the hybrid of The Essex Girl and The Battle Axe. I had white stilettos, white handbag, Viking helmet, and a breastplate. On the whole, we had hundreds of people aged between 4 and 86 come to this festival and dress up. We had some young girls who were completely transformed, and I am not talking about what they were wearing.

HW: We were dressing up as a great masquerade, so you can express yourself through reinvention.

SM: So they were saying what their secret powers were. The mother of a particular 17-year-old said, "Look, it's as if she's had a complete personality change." This particular girl, who was visiting from Ireland, wouldn't take her outfit off, so we just let her walk around in it. Lots of people loved the event. But then, getting back to your earlier question about backlash, there was one guy who came up with his wife. I think he must have been in his 50s or 60s, and he said, "What's this about?" I explained to him that it is about rejecting negative female stereotypes and reclaiming the positive personality attributes of those same female tropes. And he said, "That's crap! What you're doing is shit. You should be ashamed of yourself." He maintained this stance, even when he had been told that the

event was not to make the women emulate the stereotypes. He was looking at the images on the cards and he didn't want to understand what this was about.

HW: That sort of thing doesn't bother me at all because it sounds like that person had some bizarre issues of his own. I'd be more concerned about a backlash from other women. We did have one or two at WoW where obviously there were hundreds and hundreds of women. Again, I can understand why some women will have a gut reaction against the idea, thinking that we are just promoting stereotypes. What has happened, when we get that reaction, is that we've had conversations. We've asked them to look at the cards properly and to avoid reacting until they have taken the time necessary to understand the game and its aims. But then again, I think that due to many reasons—advertising, mass media, the instant gratification of contemporary consumer lifestyles—some people make immediate and very strong value judgements without a full understanding of this endeavour as feminist resistance.

SM: Out of the WoW festival we talked to over one and a half thousand people, not to mention the fact that I went to BBC Radio 4's *Woman's Hour* in front of a live audience of thousands. The programme was thereafter available on the catch-up service on BBC Radio iPlayer. But out of all those thousands of people that we spoke to, there was only one woman who still felt offended.

Her issue was that we shouldn't be engaging with words like slags or slut. Our position is that we have to engage with them to explain them, to address the related issues, and then we can move on. Basically what we are doing is asking people to engage. That's it. But she maintained her position, even after we had spoken with her for about three quarters of an hour.

HW: Another common reaction that comes to mind, when you ask about backlash, is the questioning we field about male stereotyping. It is not a backlash, per se, but a fairly consistent reaction for people to ask about the male equivalents—which is loaded, for a variety of complex reasons. We are not saying there are no male stereotypes. There are certainly many. We looked at this, because we knew the issue would come up and we knew we had to be able to talk about this. And when we looked at the stereotypes about men, what was overriding is that male stereotypes are about sexual prowess, and they are about boastful, swaggering, macho. So in other words, they are actually about high esteem rather than low esteem. The worst thing you can call a heterosexual man is anything that pertains to him being feminine. So a man dressing up in women's clothing is hilarious and it is demeaning. So it still comes back, really, we think, to the same subject: the value of women.

SM: Some women have come back to us saying we should do these for men, because men too are now struggling to find their place with the changes in

society, perhaps relative to the changing roles of women.

HW: We are both mothers of boys and we know there are huge issues with underachievement for boys. There is mass youth male unemployment, so it is actually a subject close to our hearts.

SM: We are completely sympathetic to this, but we just think, "Hey, come on, guys, if you want to do this, you can do this for yourselves very easily." We must have a focus and know our limits—be aware of how much we can take on. We are both feminists, and feminism and women's issues are really our driving force.

* * *

No doubt, negative labelling affects more people other than women. This game inspired by the feminist principles of its creators is a strategy that can be used to address other situations of social injustice involving other identity groups. Perhaps the use of negative labels is inevitable in media representations, so this becomes a battle of wits. There must be a struggle to rethink, reclaim and integrate! Those who are undermined can still be empowered to rethink their worth, reclaim their esteem, assert themselves, and thus be encouraged to contribute their quota to society. That is the logic and the merit of *Superstrumps*.

Our sincere thanks to Syd Moore, Heidi Wigmore and the many women who collaborated with them on this project. We are also grateful to Syd and Heidi

for sharing their time and thoughts in March 2012, and for the permission to reprint select cards from the *Superstrumps* game. Visit the following websites for more on the game and their other works:

<http://www.superstrumps.com/>
<http://www.heidiwigmore.com/>
<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Syd-Moore/118216464935269>

Images Notes

Brand Design Heidi Wigmore
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Bios

Syd Moore is the author of *The Drowning Pool* and *Witch Hunt*, novels which explore Essex witch hunts. She is currently working on her third book, *The Sacrifice*. Before embarking on a career in education, she worked extensively in the publishing industry, fronting Channel 4's book programme, *Pulp*. She was the founding editor of *Level 4*, an arts and culture magazine, and is co-creator of *Superstrumps*, the game that reclaims female stereotypes. When she is not writing Syd works for *Metal Culture*, an arts organisation, promoting arts and cultural events and developing literature programmes.

Syd Moore est l'auteure de *The Drowning Pool* et de *Witch Hunt*, deux romans qui centrés sur les chasses aux sorcières d'Essex. Elle travaille actuellement à son troisième livre,

intitulé *The Sacrifice*. Avant d'entamer une carrière en éducation, elle a œuvré longuement dans le monde de l'édition, en dirigeant notamment l'émission sur la littérature de *Channel 4* : « *Pulp* ». Elle est fondatrice du défunt magazine sur l'art et la culture *Level 4*, et co-créatrice de *Superstrumps*, un jeu axé sur la réappropriation des stéréotypes de la féminité. Quand elle n'écrit pas, Syd œuvre auprès de *Metal Culture*, un organisme pour la promotion d'événements culturels et artistiques et le développement de programmes en littérature.

Heidi Wigmore is a visual artist and fine art lecturer. She studied at Norwich School of Art and completed an MA at the University of East London in 2001. Her practice is drawing based but multidisciplinary, incorporating installation, props and film. Her imagery is overtly figurative but dislocated, she is interested in the (imperfect) imitation of the human: the doll/mannequin/dummy, the human simulacrum. Heidi's public art projects include a temporary billboard artwork in central London, 'Independent Free State', that explored the female form as map/territory and customized beach huts at The South Bank Centre for the Festival of Britain in 2011. She has lectured for University of Essex and Anglia Ruskin University. She currently runs workshops with English National Ballet and is an artistic assessor for Arts Council England.

Heidi Wigmore est artiste visuelle et *lecturer* en Beaux-Arts. Elle a étudié à la Norwich School of Arts et obtenu une maîtrise de la University of East

London en 2001. Ses travaux sont basés sur le dessin mais demeurent multidisciplinaires en incorporant l'installation, ainsi que des accessoires et des extraits filmiques. Son imagerie est à la fois figurative et disloquée, et elle s'intéresse aux imitations toujours forcément imparfaites de la figure humaine telles que la poupée, le mannequin et le pantin. Parmi ses projets publics on trouve notamment « Independent Free State », un détournement temporaire de panneau publicitaire au cœur de Londres qui explorait la forme féminine en tant que carte/territoire, ainsi qu'une série de cabines de plage transformées au South Bank Centre pour l'édition 2011 du *Festival of Britain*. Elle a été *lecturer* à l'Université de Essex et à la Angela Ruskin University. Elle dirige actuellement des ateliers en collaboration avec le English National Ballet, et occupe la position d'évaluatrice artistique pour le Arts Council England.

Oluyinka Esan is a Reader in the School of Film and Media at the University of Winchester UK. Her research focuses on media production practices and reception of media messages especially by women and children. This is informed by her interest in social relevance of media messages and their impact on society. Through her empirical studies in non-Western contexts, Oluyinka Esan offers fresh perspectives which enrich conceptualisations of media and film practices. Her recent works offer insight into audience pleasures and the valuing of films (Nollywood). She is the author of *Nigerian Television, Fifty Years of*

Television in Africa (AMV Publishers Princeton NJ, 2009). Her current project is *Watching Television: What Nigerian Children Want*. Dr Esan convened the roundtable event on "Media and Mothers' Matters" (October 2011) at which earlier versions of papers in this dossier were first presented.

Oluyinka Esan est *reader* à la School of Film and Media de l'Université de Winchester, UK. Elle mène des recherches sur les pratiques de production médiatique et la réception des messages médiatiques, en particulier chez les femmes et les enfants. Ces travaux s'inscrivent dans le cadre plus large de ses intérêts pour la pertinence et l'impact sociaux des messages médiatiques. À travers ses travaux empiriques en contextes non occidentaux, Oluyinka suggère des perspectives neuves à même d'enrichir nos conceptions des pratiques médiatiques et filmiques. Ses travaux les plus récents examine la notion de plaisir spectateur en lien avec différents échelles de mise en valeur des pratiques cinématographiques (Nollywood). Elle est l'auteure de *Nigerian Television, Fifty Years of Television in Africa* (AMV Publishers Princeton NJ, 2009). Elle travaille actuellement à l'écriture d'un nouveau livre intitulé *Watching Television: What Nigerian Children Want*. Elle a organisé la table-ronde « Media and Mothers' Matters » (Octobre 2011) dans laquelle ont été présentées les premières versions des articles du présent dossier.

