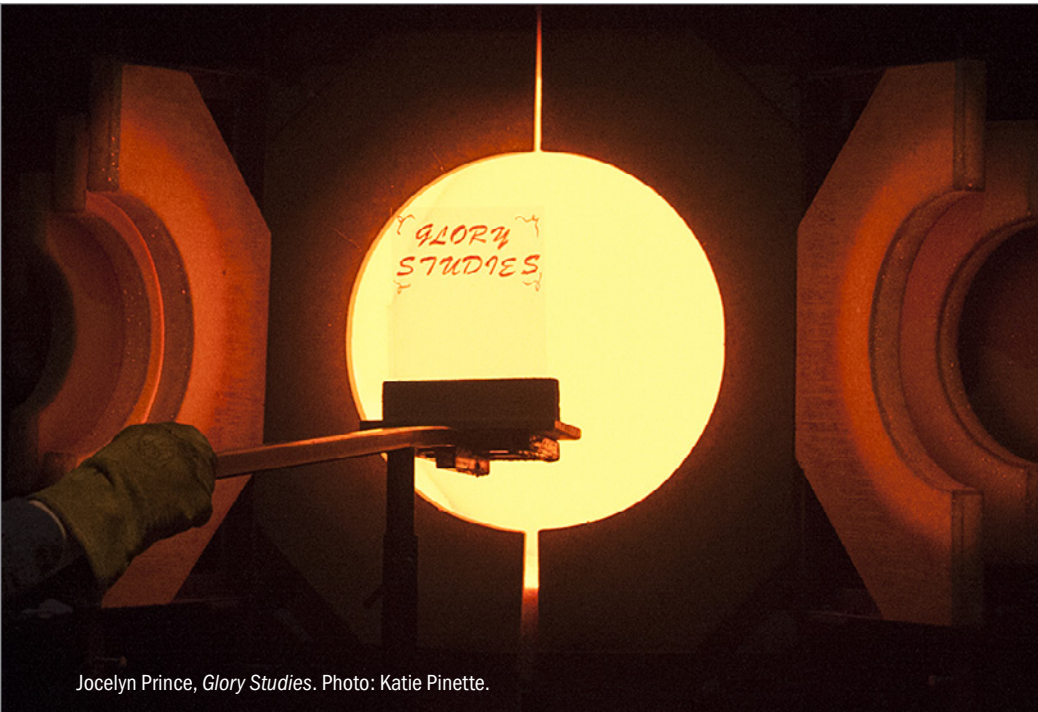


MAKING THINGS WITH WORDS

by Anna Riley



Jocelyn Prince, *Glory Studies*. Photo: Katie Pinette.

Glory hole, flashing, jacking, jack and crack, necking, juicy, hot bit, strap, paddle the bottom, moil, knob, bonk off, strip off, strip gather, marver tart (muffin), double dip, blow-pipe, blow partner, blow softer, *blow harder*.

What do we love about our glass studio jargon? Well, our language is funny, provocative and peculiar. It is the trade specific language of expertise, and it is ours. We can use these words with precision and see a layer of meaning in them that non-glassblowers do not see. More often than not, the words seem sexual even though the sexuality of the term does not always create a direct parallel to the copulative counterpart (“blow harder” is probably not a command you have encountered in bed).

What do we think about this language founding our artistic relationship to the material? If we were to write a Richard Serra-style “Verb List Compilation” for the glassblowing studio, it might read like a sexy to-do list: to strip, to blow, to jack it in, to paddle the bottom, to open the lip, to bonk off. If these are “Actions to Relate to Oneself,” the subtitle of Serra’s list – verbs marrying artist, gesture, and material – what position are we submitting ourselves to within this field of language?

In their upcoming lecture “Blow Harder: An Exploration of Language, Sexuality & Gender in the Glassblowing Studio” Karen Donnellan and Suzanne Peck will unpack the lexicon of the glassblowing studio, beginning with the question: Is it sexual? If so, how? Why? Through a combination of etymological research at the Corning Museum’s Rakow Library and, specifically in regard to American hotshops, interviewing our community and Studio Glass Movement elders, their investigations move to define and interpret, as educators, artists, and women.

Donnellan and Peck see this research moving in a number of directions including as a point of departure for self-analytic conversation amongst our community. This conversation raises several questions that seem particularly pertinent. If we agree the language is sexual, is this problematic? Born out of a dominantly masculine craft history, is the glassblowing vocabulary patriarchal and misogynistic? Is it anti-feminist? Is it possible that these words sow seeds that affect the entire timeline of one’s relationship with glass as a material? In short, does the sexualized language become a self-selecting tool deterring

certain students, particularly those who are non-gender conforming or perhaps just shy, who might otherwise be interested in using the material?

In my interview with Donnellan and Peck, Peck offered this synopsis of their thinking: “This is the core language that we are all taught, and in its definitive usage it is not a problem because it is defining objects and actions that are not necessarily sexualized, that in fact are not sexual.” They are, instead, Peck argues, descriptive and referential, pointing toward actions and processes specific to the hotshop. “But because of their associations,” she says, “English speakers can connect them to sexualized things. There is a layer of problematizing here. Problems for both women and men.”

By proposing alternative vocabulary and encouraging our community to be imaginative with our language, Donnellan and Peck think they can make the hotshop a welcoming space for more people. “If there is a suite of vocabulary choices that you could use in place of ‘blow harder’ that you automatically go to because the lexicon has been expanded, then all of a sudden the field becomes richer,” Peck says. Although they’re not against sexualized language in the hotshop, Donnellan and Peck want to imagine an alternative and playful vocabulary that does not flow from a predominantly male perspective.

Among many linguistic alternatives their lecture will propose a feminist vocabulary for the hotshop, not as the end-all solution but to start a conversation and spark the collective imagination of our community. They hope to collect our community’s linguistic history, ideas, and opinions through a survey that is included at the end of this article.

We have seen projects that have manipulated glass language in meaningful ways. Jocelyne Prince’s 2015 performance “Glory Studies of Unexplained Events” (among its many peculiar and multi-sensory actions) acknowledges the word “glory”

as both the absurd title of our reheating equipment, and recognizes the chamber as a space of awe, warmth, and light; an incubator for growth.

As an educator myself, I am keenly curious to see what Donnellan and Peck produce. In the past few months, I've taken pleasure in reimagining certain hotshop actions through a fluid and maternal lens (the bubble is crowning, the furnace is the mother, or 'give me air' rather than 'blow'). The glassblowing studio is rich with this potential.

It is clear to me that attention to language, even in our small glassblowing community, has the potential to be a revolutionary gesture for a number of reasons. It is undeniable that language plays a significant role in molding perception. Those who are in control of language are therefore in control of perception, an extraordinary place to be as educators translating this material-knowledge to a wider audience. To be responsible, enlightened knowledge-conduits, this requires sensitivity to word choice.

Our status as "glassblowers" rather than "glassmen," is, at least, already presented as gender-neutral. We are, however, "craftsmen," a term that was appropriate when only men were permitted into craft guilds. Pilchuck Glass School calls their gaffers "Craftspersons-in-Residence" and has a notably all-female gaffer line-up this summer.

"The [all-woman] gaffer team is one way of shifting the conversation. It had to be a gesture like this. Why wouldn't it be all women? It is not an ultimate solution, but it's the beginning of a conversation that is way overdue," Donnellan says. "The whole field of glass is stuck in the 60's compared to the rest of the art field. Why aren't we questioning the status quo? A lot of responsibility is on institutions and educators. It is getting better, but there is still more work to do. It is our job to do the prodding and make sure the conversation happens."

Donnellan's point rings to my ears as a call to action. How do we make things

that reflect our open and inclusive thought processes while working within an environment that might not wholly embody principles of equality? How can we re-define the space for our own purposes and for a new generation? Give it an inclusive and progressive language?

"Increasingly, students identify as non-binary, gender queer, or trans and that's where the problem is becoming more acute. The language doesn't necessarily make everyone feel welcome in those studios. We want as much inclusivity as possible," Donnellan says, "Right now my students are a majority of girls. Even the architecture of the studio affects your relationship with the material. It is not uncommon for a studio's equipment to be designed for the body of a man, but this architecture is shifting and along with that the language should shift too."

I think it is a meaningful gesture to revise the common lexicon to reflect these concerns – to open up space for women, trans, queer – but also to promote creativity within the rich and textured expanse of the English language. *Making the field richer* is perhaps the most exciting notion of their proposal. "Addressing glassblowing from a linguistic perspective and tying that into gender politics and the problematizing of space feels important," Peck says. "Particularly when looking towards phrases like 'grab them by the pussy.' That is about as ineloquent linguistically as it is problematic sexually." Donnellan and Peck's approach to language embodies a true notion of feminism; they embrace inclusivity and openness to difference and change.

Please participate in Karen Donnellan and Suzanne Peck's "Glass and Language Survey," to inform and support their research of language, gender and sexuality in the hot glass studio. <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/blowharder>

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