

Preface

Perhaps one of the oddest tasks bequeathed to dictionaries, whose tautological mission is to use words to define words, is that they must also define themselves. The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that a dictionary is a “book which explains or translates...the words of a language...giving for each word its typical spelling, an explanation of its meaning or meanings,” etc. If this is what a dictionary does, then the book in your hands is not one. But maybe a dictionary can describe words not by spellings, accepted meanings, etymologies, and so forth, but rather by questions, fragments, and conjectures. In doing so, *The Dictionary of the Possible* works to restore words to the insecurity, variability, strangeness, and wonder that they have in our lives.

This dictionary, like all dictionaries, originated in a community of speakers. This community was a fluctuating group of artists, curators, writers, academics and amateurs of all stripes who met for a series of twenty-one public discussions held at The New School from September 2014 to December 2015. Each session concentrated on unraveling a keyword selected by two discussion leaders, and after each meeting participants were invited to post questions about the word in a shared google doc. The process resulted in the congregation of a core group of participants who met regularly and others, equally valuable, who joined us once or several times during our year and a half run. Over time the discussions opened on to more terms than we could fit in our calendar, and the community of people who wanted to be involved but could not participate kept growing. In response, we began to solicit individual entries about the words we missed, and, for the most part, from those who could not make it. The resulting “dictionary,” collects an eccentric lexicon that is an index of our contingent community.

We offer the reader these fragments with the hope that the pedagogical intensity of hours of discussion might be re-presented in a different format. This book, like the group meetings, depends intimately on its reactivation by a reader or a group of readers. In this future activation lies the promise of possibility. Absent from this book are the recommended readings that were distributed in advance of each discussion. If you wish to consult these readings, they will remain accessible as long as possible through Shifter’s website: <http://shifter-magazine.com/>

As you turn these pages you will quickly discover that we have chosen the standard format of alphabetization. This is only because any other procedure would have imposed the will of the editors onto the terms and the standard form, in this sense, was the most random.

Some questions to begin: How is our sense of everyday life altered by how we think about what is possible? What are the political ramifications of championing possibility, such as found in the World Social Forum’s insistence that “Another World is Possible,” but also Hannah Arendt’s claim that the “fundamental belief” of totalitarianism is that “everything is possible”? And finally, how is our language shaped by the delicate balance of the probability of meaning, which makes communication possible, and the possibility of meaning, which allows for difference to emerge?

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