Slow fuse. It’s an image that conjures up several interpretations. The most obvious may be the slow fuse time bomb where an attached cord is lit at one end and witnesses watch the fire slowly make its way to the bomb itself. Once at its destination, an explosion occurs and our surroundings are forever changed. During the watching, viewers feel some panic, fearing the inevitable, yet hoping for a rescue. It’s a ploy used in the movies to create suspense.

In the world of Saturday morning cartoons, Wiley Coyote was forever being blown up, his fur sizzling, it seemed there was nothing that he could do right, although, given his intent, perhaps it is just as well his elaborate plans eternally backfired...

Regardless of this stereotypical image, slow fuse is an image that is pervasive in our society. We watch, anxiously, while individuals, governments, the weather, or some other entity, tests our resolve, before we witness the unthinkable. Hurricane Katrina is a recent example where we felt a slow build-up of nature’s fury, never believing something horrific could happen—yet it did, and thousands upon thousands of people had their lives shattered in a matter of minutes when the dikes failed. Similarly, we witnessed the on-coming collapse of the financial house of cards that greed and profiteering on Wall Street and
around the world had created, with repercussions impacting on workers and pensioners, on lenders and borrowers. The financial downfall had long been predicted, yet still the moneychangers sought to enrich their coffers.

In the world of the academy, lighting a fuse to inspire, to innovate, to challenge, to engage in new ways of inquiry, is an act of resistance, an act of curiosity, an act of yearning—evoking a desire to renew the academy, to initiate the big bang that will bring forth a new galaxy of stars, planets, and scholarly life as it has not yet been imagined... here a fuse is lit and nurtured, others are called to attention, holding our breath, we watch as new possibilities come into our presence...

How does this image, slow fuse, relate to arts-based research? We suggest a number of ways. One may be perceived as genealogical, another conceptual, and still another, artistic. From a genealogical perspective, arts based research has been slowly developing over a long period of time. Artists have been incorporating forms of inquiry in and through their work for decades, indeed centuries, although our understanding of what it means to inquire through the arts is only more recently being explored and theorized within the academy.

We are simultaneously constructions and embodiments of our individual and communal contexts and locations. The theoretical, political, cultural, economic, environmental lenses through which we interpret our worlds as perceived and lived, are dictated by the milieu and ideologies and experiences within which we engage. What we so often take for granted requires greater scrutiny. What has breath and living to do with the academy? We pay attention to breath only when it is lacking, when we find it impossible to breathe, when others (or ourselves) have fouled our own life’s support. We recognize then the utility of breath, its pragmatism, its impact on our lives. To bring our attention to that which is taken for granted requires an intervention, a disruption, perhaps even a miracle.

What calls us to breath is a newborn’s first gasp of a life’s narrative; we are aware of our breath when we have run a triathlon, have taken too deep a plunge at the deep end of the pool, or have witnessed its absence in the body of another. What calls our attention to breath in the academy is the recognition that we have lost awareness that we are barely breathing at all.

In the mid to late twentieth century, qualitative forms of research became popular and several educational theorists embraced the arts as a metaphoric means to understanding how research could be understood and used through the arts. As time progressed, other theorists used the arts in innovative ways and eventually arts-based research became an entity unto itself. However, an explosion soon followed when silenced academics and artist-educators came forward with many variations upon the theme and praxis of arts-based research. Today we have performative inquiry, a/r/tography, narrative inquiry, poetic inquiry, arts informed research, musical inquiry, art as practice based research, etc. No one could have imagined, even a decade ago, that the arts would become so prominent in the landscape of qualitative research traditions, so quickly.

In a corridor two academics are in conversation. The year is 1994. One, an arts educator, complains about a merit system that does not recognize her art, even though, she explains, her art exhibits are adjudicated. Of value only for her tenure pursuits are the peer-reviewed scholarly articles that she writes. The graduate student, a drama educator, commiserates. They have not yet imagined that in time their work and writing, in companionship and collaboration with others, will result in the conceptualization, articulation, and practice of a/r/tography and performative inquiry as research methodologies.
Conceptually, a slow fuse in arts-based research is a metaphor that details gradually exposed ideas, concerns, and understandings. By weaving together theory, practice, and research, arts-based research traditions (and innovations) create cases or stories that simultaneously or continguously reveal several perspectives on a theme. This complementary strategy gradually exposes deep and expansive arguments or understandings, but more importantly, it brings the ‘ah ha’ moment or moment of recognition to each experience. This is when the reader, viewer, listener, and mover, holistically experience something so deeply that their views of the world change instantly. Arts-based research has the capacity to evoke or provoke deep understandings through an image, a collection of movements, a series of sounds, or a few well chosen words.

*This too is possible. To inquire and write with breath, with touch, with heart, with curiosity, with and through the arts within the academy. Jacques Daignault invites us to create accoustmatic texts, texts that listen, texts that invite the reader, participant, to engage, to write between, over, under, through, across the lines. Welcome words, welcome characters, welcome body, emotion, feelings, welcome intertextuality, welcome grace, however you understand grace to be, welcome the unknown. Listen with embodied awareness. He and others who have sought through their work to create a new awareness within the academy of multiple ways of knowing and engaging have given us permission to challenge the status quo, to recognize what is possible, to engage in new narratives. Working with/through the arts in inquiry calls us to be present with ourselves, and in relationship with others within the places that we live, play, create, work. To recognize the openings, the impossibilities, the absences, the as-yet unknown, “enlarging spaces of the possible” (Sumara & Davis, 1997) is the desire and ambition of arts-based research.*

Artistically, arts-based research, when conceived as process and product, has the potential to keep people engaged with living inquiry[1]—an inquiry that pursues questioning and questing, in a life giving, life making pursuit of meaning-making. Many forms of research represent new understandings and ideas, including many forms of arts-based research. However, arts-based research has brought to the fore the concept that the doing of research is just as important as the research itself. Each of us can be engaged in our own questioning and questing, individually and in communities of inquiry. Through the arts, we creatively, appreciatively, and critically engage with our lives in meaningful ways. Pursuing the process of inquiry is a long slow commitment to understanding and it is when we stop or pause to represent what our inquiries have been about, that our understandings suddenly explode. The process of artsmaking is itself a slow fuse. We linger with it, savour it, experience it, and then suddenly, something clicks, and form is revealed or created. Artist/performance educators know this well since they also see teaching and learning in similar ways.

*The emergence of arts-based research has infused scholarly work with a multi-dimensionality of engagements that call into question who we are as scholars and researchers and how we engage in research. Arts-based research is, we suggest, the artist/performers-scholars’ response to the postmodern critical theory that calls attention to the complexities and complicities of inquiry, interpretation, and representation. How might we respond? To bring a creative reflective voice into the academy and into our conversations, is to offer another way of being in inquiry and reflection. This too is possible. Engagement with the arts in inquiry calls us to question who we are as researchers, as educators, as citizens, and how we have come to understand our own positioning and responsibilities in constructed realities that situate us within our own communal and academic endeavors.*
Arts-based research calls us to question, to interrupt, to disrupt, to create, to inquire, to reflect, and to engage in meaningful ways, so that we might begin to offer new ways of engagement and understanding to our students, our educators, our communities. Appelbaum (1995) speaks of a stop: a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity. A stop alerts us to what is absent, what may yet be possible, if we are mindfully aware and listening...

Between closing and beginning lives a gap, a caesura, a discontinuity. The betweenness is a hinge that belongs to neither one nor the other. It is neither poised nor unpoised, yet moves both ways ... It is the stop.

A stop is a call to the ethical consideration that holds us responsible for our choices of action as researchers, artists, performers, educators. Reimagining research through the arts is such a stop.

Slow fuse. Whatever it means to you, the reader, is also important. This issue is a pause in the unfolding journey of arts based research. An invitation and permission to explore and thoughtfully reflect on what is possible through arts based research. Each author in this collection engages in the arts to provoke us to learn in ways that could not occur in any other fashion. Each author contributes to the practices of arts-based research through their questions, their concerns, their insights, and unique experience. They explore questions of ethics, interpretation, engagement, reflection, and expression. It is our hope that you linger with these essays, spend time with our authors’ ideas and reflections, and allow time for an explosion or whisper of recognition of an emergent possibility. In this issue, we, as arts-based researchers seek, at this moment, to turn around and reflect on the “path we lay down in walking”[2] together.

Resources


[1] See also Karen Meyer’s (2008) conceptualization and articulation of living inquiry as a way of being in inquiry and engaging within the world, with particular attention to place,
time, language and other.