Guiding Impact In Experimental Design
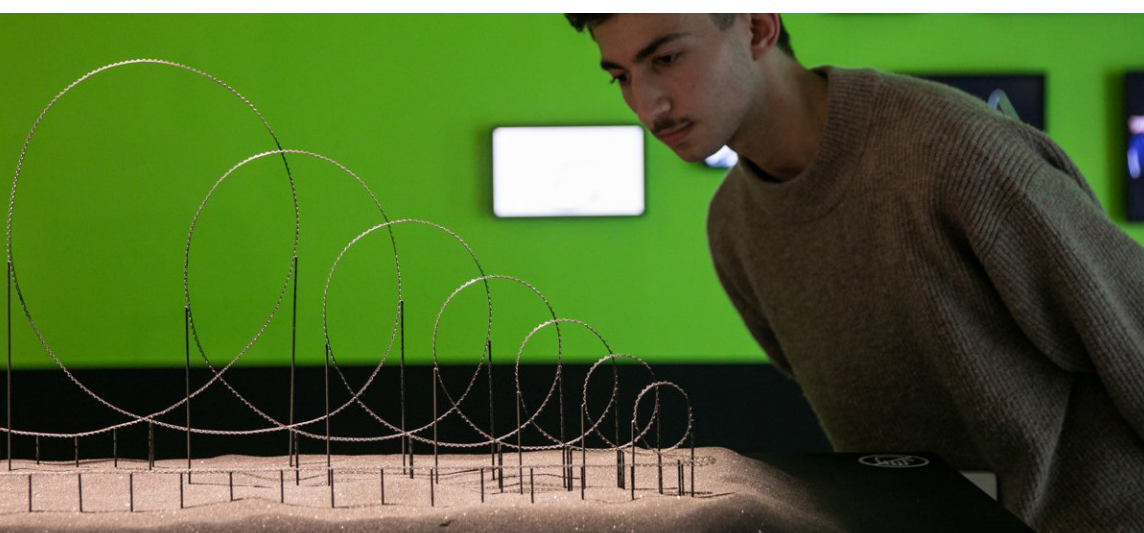
Kristiaan Brauer
University of Washington

So you're working on the next great work of speculative/critical/discursive/experimental/etc. design. Your vision is clear, your takes are hot, your design is evocative. How can you maximize the number of eyeballs your project connects with and thus it's impact? I propose the following guidance:


With Euthanasia Coaster, artist Julijonas Urbonas proposes a roller coaster that would humanely kill its passengers. The project fouses on intentional humane death, while ignoring other aspects of recreation and amusment.

1. THE PROJECT HAS A CLEAR (AND POSSIBLY NARROW) AREA OF EXPLORATION.

For a discussion of a project to begin, its critics must know what area the project is attempting to explore. Designs that attempt to examine a broad topic are likely to be less successful in sparking conversations than projects that examine specific ideas or smaller topics. Projects must be clear in the *specific* area they intend to explore for critics to determine if the project is worthwhile and for other designers working in the same space to be impacted.

2. THE PROJECT CAUSES THE CONVERSATIONS OR ACTIONS THE DESIGNER DESIRED.

Experimental design aims to change or question the thoughts and beliefs of others, its impact can be judged on how many viewers change or question their views. If viewers remain unmoved, or potentially worse, misunderstand the designers area of exploration the design misses its opportunity. Well-crafted press releases, contextual visuals and clear descriptions can help journalists and the public clearly understand the intent of the project.
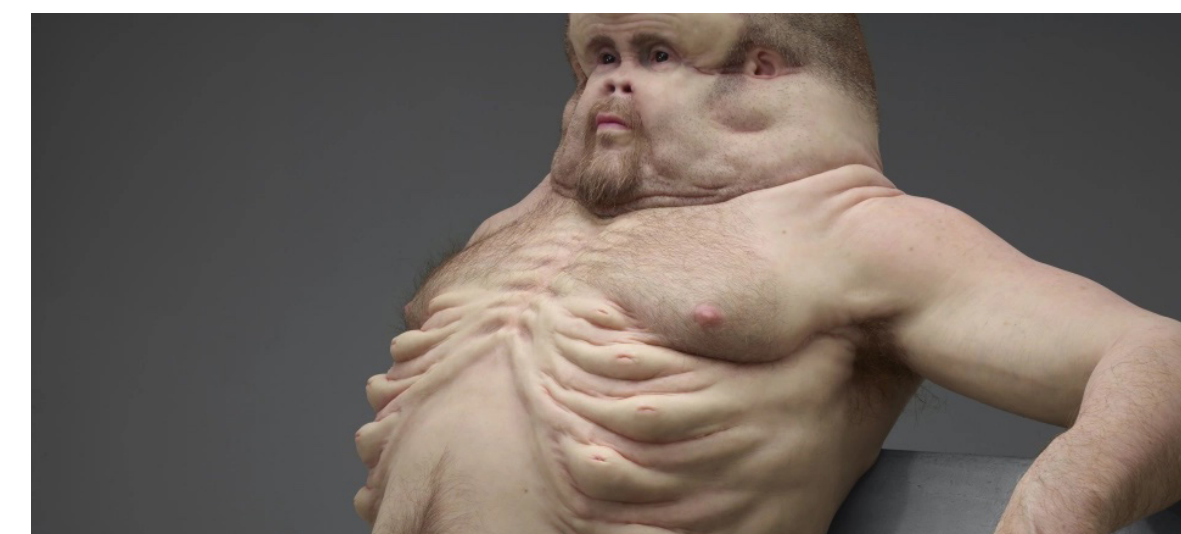
Project Graham, an imagined human designed to survive car accidents was commissioned by the Australian Transport Accident Commission. Press coverage consistently connects Graham's features with his ability to survive car accidents.

Agrippa (A Book of the Dead) is a book that is destroyed in the act of reading. It's compelling concept and adversarial existance have caused others to extensively document the book's text and creation, keeping its memory alive.

3. THE PROJECT CONTINES TO REACH THE AUDIENCE THE DESIGNER INTENDED.

A project that fails to find an audience or be kept alive and accessible has no hope of impacting future designers. Many experimental designs could be considered "partially lost", preserved only in a single book or a few photos on an archived website. A project with so little resonance or so little reach has no hope of impacting the thinking of practicing designers, much less those working in similar fields. For work to impact future designers it must be easily discoverable, kept alive by resonating with others.

4. THE PROJECT EXPLORES NOVEL TERRAIN, UN- OR UNDER-EXPLORED BY OTHER METHODOLOGIES.

Design possesses a different toolset than other forms of inquiry and should operate in a different way. Design is not falsifiable in the same way, dealing as it does with multifaceted "wicked problems", and so designers should strive to explore new terrain, or if they feel a previous project is incomplete, add or remix it enough that it is easily recognizable as a new work, building on the previous project. While this may seem obvious, rigor in this area can spur experimental design to unexplored frontiers.

BMW's GINA concept car utilizes a PU-coated Spandex for its skin in place of the usual steel or aluminum. Designers are uniquely positioned to explore these in-context material strategies in ways engineers aren't.

Post-It Notes
Attached Here

This guide is a work in progress, and can always be improved. Feel free to leave comments or suggestions.