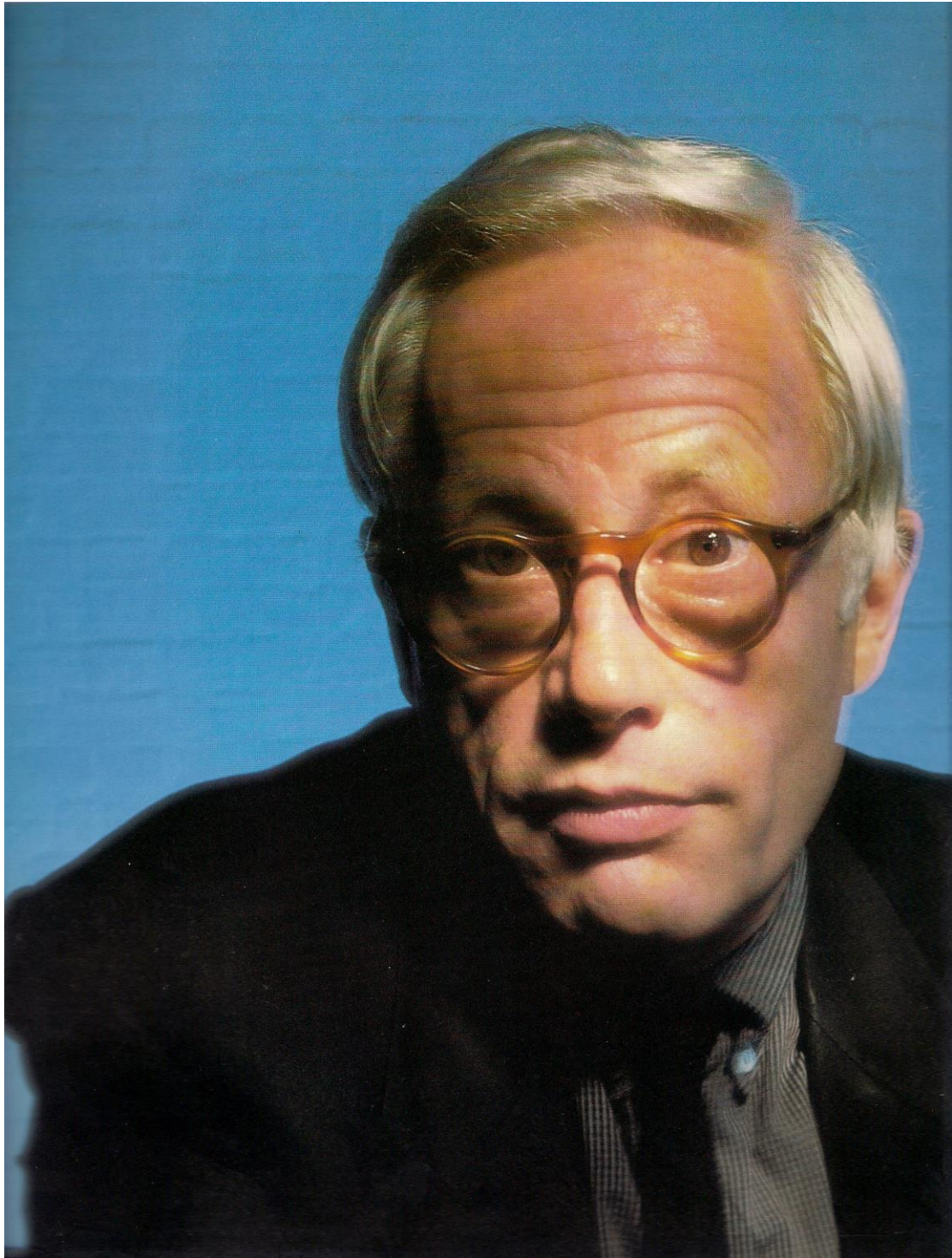


The apostle of Cool

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Interview with Dieter Rams, the crusading German designer of Braun products and much besides



Dieter Rams is restless. He gesticulates, interrupts, digresses, is emphatic. For a quarter of a century, he has been head of the product design department of Braun, Frankfurt. Rams says that the small, square black alarm clocks designed by his 16 strong team are now the market leaders in Japan. 'Through design, not technology', he waves. 'I think our critics are wrong maybe they are all a little bit ill'.

Dieter Rams is on a crusade. In a world of affected flamboyance, he is an old fashioned fanatic. When Rams goes for walks, they say, he picks up and later disposes of every single piece of litter he encounters. In products, he wants harmony, sparseness, lightness, compactness. He demands honesty, utilitarianism, simplicity. He insists on the democratic values of the Shakers, the purism of Japanese food arrangements and the longevity that only comes with formal aesthetic restraint. Yes, he is keen on environmental protection too. He is moral; he is rational. 'The Second World War was short - but look how much bad was done! We don't realise the chaos. Men were rats, they were underground... Us designers, and the magazines, and the handful of design orientated companies like Erco, Olivetti and Herman Miller - we've done a lot to get people out of that rat like existence'.

Rams reports directly to the chairman at Braun. The company, which is now a subsidiary of America's Gillette, has sales of about £300m, with 75 per cent of revenues coming from abroad. Rams ensures that, though there are two layers of management between him and the top brass at Boston, the Braun look always stays modern yet, across 300 lines, retains an unwavering continuity with past tradition. His pocket calculator, with the coloured, circular, convex buttons, still seems fresh after a decade in production. It is trendy, but the link back to the classic years of the late 1950s and early 1960s is clear enough.

Building or design?

Born in 1933 in Wiesbaden, Rams trained in architecture and first worked with Skidmore, Owings & Merrill on the design of American consulates in Munich, Frankfurt and Bremen. At 22, he became an industrial designer at Braun. The company had been founded in 1921 by Max Braun, and had ended the 1930s with a distinctive logo, 1000 employees and a distinguished range of integrated radios and record players. When a gawky and youthful Rams joined Braun, however, the firm had moved on. Max had died, but had left an inheritance of radiograms, electric shavers, Multimix kitchen mixers and two sons - Erwin and Artur. Competition in the industry was fierce. It was time for a change.

The result was the revolutionary radio/record player, the SK4, shown to rapturous acclaim at the Radio Exhibition, Düsseldorf, in 1955. Radio, hi-fi and speaker were all in one; the aesthetic was entirely novel, and in a move away from the sheet metal that was sometimes to get the better of him in the 1960s, Rams put a transparent plastic lid on the machine. Distantly, at least, he is responsible for smoked acrylic record player lids the world over. Even now, Braun runs a flourishing legal department, so rapid and frequent is the plagiarism that attends its new ideas.

Post-war economics

The SK4 was a result of a collaboration with the Hochschule für Gestaltung, Ulm, where Hans Gugelot, the man who in 1964 designed Kodak's ubiquitous Carousel slide projector, plus the graphics and exhibition designer Otl Aichler, briefly established a post war Bauhaus in the ruins of the Third Reich. Along with the Skidmore team, the Brauns and a charismatic carpenter grandfather, Gugelot and Aichler were the major influences on Rams.

America was also an important factor. Rams had worked on American consulates. On the SK4 he listened to Dave Brubeck and Miles Davis; he played a bit of trumpet himself. 'In design terms, the Second World War led to a big American presence: a strong dollar, thus big investments in Europe, and companies like Miller and Knoll International. There was Aalto and Saarinen, but Denmark and Switzerland had stood still. When Knoll opened an outlet in Stuttgart, it was a brave new world for me'.

Technical limitations

To a Germany devastated, divided, and occupied by GIs, America was the means by which Modernism was kept alive. Even the Hochschule, a private school that, before its closure in 1968, was dedicated to wiping out all vestiges of Werkbund arts and craftiness from German products, raised half its initial funds from McCloy, the American High Commissioner for Germany, in 1948. It is important to note these points because they illustrate the limitations of the Federal Republic. In a Britain, where *Vorsprung durch Technik* is a cult joke and the Germans are widely admired for their *Arbeitslust*, we tend to neglect Germany's industrial limitations and instead play up her ethnically seated strengths. But Rams' achievement is to be one of the few post-war West German industrial designers to achieve international fame - through Prussian hard work, optimism, and a quality of being opinionated about things that is both irritating and endearing.

The significance of Rams' early years for Braun are that they cover either side of 1958. They are the years of West Germany's economic miracle, and that of Japan, and of Italy too.

Rams was and remains a one man band in the middle of an anonymous orchestra of German factories playing at full pelt. He appeals for calm, and seems conscious himself of his country's limitations. Hitler was crazy, Speer played at being Caesar and Napoleon. Now the products West Germany sells to the Third World 'are a crime'. While Braun has audaciously set up factories in Spain, Mexico and Ireland, West German banks and Helmut Kohl show no interest in industrial design. 'Deutsche Bank, with those twin towers in Frankfurt, has a big corporate identity manual. I helped build them a system of walls and tables out of the best possible materials. Their paintings are worth millions of dollars. But they are not willing to take risks. They keep hold of their money. There is no good propaganda, no good magazines or exhibitions in support of design in Germany, and the government isn't helping the banks wake up to it'.

Matt black, bright white

Rams is, anyway, misunderstood. It was not he, but other members of his design team, who did the excellent Braun hairdryer, electric toothbrush kit and that black alarm clock (generally, the choice of black for Rams' later hi fi is to my eye not as clever as his earlier selection of white; but the blackness of the alarm clock is entirely appropriate). His most spectacular system - a variable cantilevered living room stand on which sat a rotatable white television, a white reel to reel tape recorder and a white compact radio hi-fi - was never manufactured in full. His T3 and T4 pocket radios (1958, 1969), the first of their kind in West Germany were, by the 1970s, destroyed by Japanese manufacturers such as Sony. The same thing happened to his commendable portable radios (1961, 1963). He admits that his radiograms were not profitable until the late 1960s. His cinecameras, to my taste, are unlikely ever to set the world on fire.

On the other hand, not nearly enough people know about Rams' 'Montage'. This is a modular storage system, complete with anodised aluminium frame and suitable for both office and residential use. Rams developed Montage at a breakneck pace between 1957 and 1959. It has been manufactured for 30 years by Vitsoe, a Frankfurt furniture company owned by Niels Vitsoe, a Danish born entrepreneur who had not a single product to his name until he met Rams.

Somehow you are drawn back to those years. Vitsoe had a big effect on Rams, but, as with his other mentors, 'there were no philosophical discussions, just talk about design details'. Bought beers by Rams, his engineering and technician colleagues at Braun became friends in a way, he hints, that the company's marketing supremos of today are not. In 1957 and 1960, Braun won the Grand Prix at two successive Milan Triennales; in 1962, the year of its stock market flotation, the Compasso D'Oro; in 1964, a special exhibition at New York's Museum of Modern Art. Later Rams work for Braun - the cylindrical table lighter (1968), the flashguns of the early 1970s, the 601/ 602 chair system for Vitsoe - is brilliant, but it is to those miracle years that one returns. Every other kind of German product was chaotic and anonymous; Rams' creations may have been anonymous, but at the same time they were brazenly unique.

Twiddling knobs

We had them in my house. The Atelier 1 radiogram, with the pearl white knobs you depressed, the winking white round circular dials you twiddled and the speakers with the wooden slats. The dials revealed little volume level numbers, black on white, through transparent windows. The top was not transparent, but opaque white. I played with that machine all through my youth.

We also had the H1 tangential fan heater (1959), in sheet metal with exquisite proportions, logo prominent, grey white and light grey. In those years West Germany had begun to put the era of punitive currency reform, Cold War, immigration and low wages behind it. Soon it was to turn to a veritable orgy of consumerism. Against all this, Rams stood out.

Rams is 55. He smokes strong cigarettes at a rapid rate, but one of his ambitions is to be healthy. Another is to spend more time with the college students he teaches and with his staff. In a country given to upheaval, he remains a beacon of fixed purpose.

Today, when America's larger population demands its reflation, West Germany despairs: it has, after all, economic problems of its own. Is Rams, an ambassador from a country we British have all grown to respect, now on the losing end? He wants to fight television and advertising overkill, as well as the disorientating character of German council housing, with 'emptiness' in furniture: 'neutrality', he stresses, 'says something'. He says that in fact there are plenty of other Dieter Rams practising design in Germany, but that they are unrecognised. 'They need the help of entrepreneurs', he exclaims with a sigh.

To hear this, of Germany, in 1987. It is all very sobering, and that is what Dieter Rams would like best.