The Godfather of Design

Over five decades, Dieter Rams defined good design. This fall the influential industrial designer is the focus of a new documentary and retrospective, marking a revival of his timeless creations.

BY JAY CHESHES
PHOTOGRAPHY BY DHAM SRIFUENGFUNG

ON A MIDSUMMER DAY at the Wright auction house in Chicago, iconic hair dryers, alarm clocks and toasters conceived by German industrial designer Dieter Rams for housewares firm Braun in the '60s, '70s and '80s are up for sale, along with Rams-designed audio and video equipment. Pictures posted online drummed up early interest for this first major auction of his vintage designs (featuring 120 pieces from a private collection).

By 1 p.m. the bids are coming in fast. Bob Greenberg, the founder and chairman of digital agency R/GA, whose recent product-design show at New York's Cooper Hewitt museum—*Bob Greenberg Selects*—put Rams's work at its center, bids remotely on a list of items. He pays $562 for a plastic kitchen scale and almost $8,000 for old stereo components, including an amplifier, turntable and tuner. "Beautifully designed products of the past are a very good investment," he says later, considering his haul.

The action at the auction is captured on camera by the king of design documentaries, filmmaker Gary Hustwit, whose 2007 breakout hit, *Helvetica*, a deep dive into typeface design, all but launched the genre. *Rams*, Hustwit's fourth feature as director and the first full-length film devoted to the design legend, premieres with screenings around the world this month. It was financed partly on Kickstarter, with $300,000 raised from 5,000 backers.

A rough cut reviewed in Hustwit's Brooklyn office opens with a close-up of fingers striking the keys of a fire engine–red Valentine Olivetti typewriter, circa 1968. A vintage TG 504 Braun reel-to-reel recorder/player hangs on a living room wall. "What is good design?" asks a voice-over in German.

The film cuts to Rams, 86, in tortoiseshell glasses with thinning white hair, at home in Germany, surrounded, as always, by his favorite things, mostly his own classic designs—chairs, tables and shelves conceived decades back for furniture-maker Vitsœ and cult stereo equipment created for Braun. Rams lives in a bubble of his own creation, in the same idealized oasis of timeless design on the edge of the Taunus forest near Frankfurt that he's occupied with his photographer wife, Ingeborg Kracht-Rams, since 1971 (the house, which he helped design, is already landmarked by his region's office for the preservation of historical monuments). "I wanted to live with my work, but it was never a museum, it was a living space," says Rams in German via email. Though he's declined most interviews lately, he answered a few questions for this article through his longtime personal manager, Britte Siepenkothen, who lives a few houses away.

So many people these days dream of blocking out the noise of the modern world. Rams, who doesn't use a computer or mobile phone, never plugged in (he communicates mostly through Siepenkothen). "I am of the opinion that all the digitization that is happening right now diminishes our ability to experience things," he tells Hustwit in an on-camera interview. "There are pictures that disappear, one after the other, without leaving traces in our memory. This goes insanely fast. And maybe that's why we can or want to consume so much."

The film finds Rams at home in his retirement years—shooting began before his 85th birthday—sharing his story on camera as never before and puttering around in his slippers, grooving to jazz, quietly tending to his bonsai trees (he has a long-standing affinity for Japanese culture).

"A lot of people see these clean, white, severe objects, and they think one thing about him," says Hustwit, "but I think he's much more in touch with nature and the environment than you would expect looking at all the stuff he's designed."

The film offers a rare glimpse beyond Rams's stern public persona. Hustwit got unprecedented access to Rams, exploring the man behind the mythology, a humanist designer with a surprisingly wry sense of humor and plenty of biting opinions on the state of the world. "There are lots of stereotypes out there about this hard-nosed Teutonic gentleman," says Vitsœ's managing director, Mark Adams, who at times served as a liaison between Rams and Hustwit on the film. "He's a tough old bugger for sure. But there is absolutely another side to him, and I think Gary may have gone some way in capturing that."

Hustwit first met Rams in 2008, interviewing him at home for *Objectified*, his follow-up to *Helvetica* that focused on the industrial design world. His bare-bones new documentary, *Rams*, offers an intimate portrait of this enigmatic figure, told largely in the designer's own voice. "You couldn't make a cluttered, messy film about Dieter Rams—it would be ridiculous," says Hustwit.

As head of the design department at Braun for 34 years starting in 1961, Rams ushered in a golden age of beautiful, functional, accessible products, inspiring a generation of acolytes with his once ubiquitous household goods. His coffee makers, alarm clocks and shavers became the backdrops to modern life through the '60s, '70s and '80s. "Braun products were truly mass manufactured, so everybody could have a piece of what he'd done," says designer Marc Newson, who joined Apple as a special projects designer in 2014, assessing Rams's work. "His design was accessible. There's a wonderful parallel with what Apple is doing now. He elevated design to a place that I think few consumers could have imagined it going. It was so refined, sophisticated and understated."

Though Rams also reached a more rarefied audience through his pricier sideline in modular furniture for Vitsœ, it's his Braun work that made him famous. His output was prodigious, overseeing hundreds of long-lasting products so intuitively designed they sometimes didn't need to come with printed instructions.

"Braun appliances were almost always built so they could be repaired [if they broke]," says Rams, decrying the rise in disposable goods. "I see it as a

THE BRAUNY MAN German industrial designer Dieter Rams, photographed at his home in Kronberg, Germany.

LESS, BUT BETTER Clockwise from top left: The ET 88 World Traveller calculator, based on the classic design by Rams and Dietrich Lubs that was an inspiration for the iPhone calculator app; the groundbreaking 1956 Phonosuper SK4 turntable with a Plexiglas lid, designed by Rams with Hans Gugelot; Rams's living room, which includes many of his classic designs, including the TG 504 Braun reel-to-reel recorder/player on the wall; Rams's home workshop.

major problem today that so many defective products can only be thrown away."

Though Rams largely stepped away from designing when he left Braun in 1997, a new generation has begun discovering his work, thanks to Apple and other design-driven companies embracing his reductionist, user-friendly approach. The recent surge in design as a business and cultural force has no doubt played a role in his revival as well. "In many ways design has become so much bigger today than when I was a student," says Swiss designer Yves Béhar, founder of Fuseproject and another longtime fan of Rams's work. "It's now the core way we judge a company, a service, a product, an experience, so naturally people look back at the history of this." The renewed interest in Rams has reached a high in the last decade, with new coffee-table books being published; fan sites emerging online; and museum shows popping up around the world, including *Dieter Rams: Principled Design*, a retrospective opening this fall at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. That show's curator, Colin Fanning, plans to incorporate designs from contemporaries of Rams from around the world "to underscore," he says, "just how radical and successful the Rams approach was for its time."

Rams, for one, finds the new attention perplexing. "It makes me feel rather uncomfortable," he says. "But I hope that it motivates people to grapple with my fundamental approach, with my motto: 'Less, but better.'"

Rams grew up in Wiesbaden, a spa town among the mountains just west of Frankfurt. In the film he talks about the influence of his paternal grandfather, Heinrich Rams, a master carpenter, and of his earliest design fascination as a young boy with the complex mechanics of Wiesbaden's hydropowered funicular railway. Hustwit dug deep into Rams's past, unearthing what archival footage and photos he could—not much exists from his childhood in Germany during and just after World War II. "I was 13 years old when the bombs stopped," he says in the documentary.

After studying architecture at an art school in Wiesbaden, he was hired in 1955 at Braun—run by brothers Artur and Erwin Braun—after responding to an ad in the paper. He focused on corporate interiors initially, but soon segued into product design, abandoning his interest in urban planning.

His earliest projects at Braun mirrored his personal passions—sleek lighters to fuel his tobacco addiction, hi-fi equipment to play the music he loved (he was a habitué of the jazz scene that arrived in Frankfurt with the GI occupation). "When I began at Braun, it bothered me that the radios lacked the necessary clarity of sound," he says. "The speakers were covered in cloth. I always called it carpet. It muffled the high notes."

In 1956, Braun introduced the Phonosuper SK4, a white turntable—nicknamed by the company "Snow White's Coffin"—with a groundbreaking Plexiglas lid. The piece helped establish Rams as a serious design voice, drawing the attention of collectors, curators and critics, though it didn't originally sell very well.

After Rams took over the design department in 1961, Braun began to push him publicly as a face of the brand. "People started calling him Mr. Braun," says Hustwit. "He looked the part—good-looking, young, drove a Porsche, listened to jazz—just the kind of image they wanted to project for this new way to live." Rams forged a single design language that cut across every Braun product category. "All of us, including Dieter, were in constant contact with one another," says his former colleague at Braun, Dietrich Lubs. "There was a permanent exchange, professionally as well as in the private sphere. In that way we developed a design language and attitude without a doctrine. We lived our work."

A few years into his tenure at Braun, Rams got permission from his bosses to develop furniture in his off hours for a new company, Vitsœ, which launched in 1959 to focus solely on his designs. The customizable pieces were designed to disappear in the background and to adapt to tight spaces. "You have to understand that people at that time only had small apartments, social-housing apartments," he explains in the film.

The furniture formed part of a system—featuring expandable shelves and armchairs that linked to become couches—with aesthetic ties to his design work at Braun. "Dieter was really the first to think about products in a pluralistic rather than singular way," says British designer Sam Hecht, whose firm, Industrial Facility, has done work for Herman Miller and Muji. "He appreciated and nurtured the concept of systems in design, where one product has a relationship to another."

Jasper Morrison, a prolific designer informed by Rams's work, calls Vitsœ's 606 Universal Shelving System, which was introduced in 1960 and has been in continuous production ever since, the "endgame in design, hard to imagine it will ever be improved on."

Morrison and his Japanese colleague Naoto Fukasawa, best known for his everyday objects for Muji, coined a new term, Super Normal, in 2006, to explain the design sensibility they share. They organized an influential exhibition together that year that included Rams's work. "Dieter's design was just right, pure, inevitable," says Fukasawa. "Personally, I just try to follow him."

In 1967 the Braun brothers sold their company to Gillette. Rams flew to Boston to meet with his new corporate bosses. The company's chief executive, Vincent Ziegler, he says, seemed to appreciate the role design had played in the German firm's success. "In only 10 years it had managed to become internationally known because of its products and, above all, because of its design," says Rams. His purview expanded into the Gillette family—his team worked on Paper Mate pens and eventually on early toothbrush designs for Oral-B. But corporate pressures started taking a toll. Through the 1970s, to spotlight the continued value of good design, Rams began to articulate his design principles, both inside and outside the company. "Three general rules govern every Braun design—a rule of order, a rule of harmony and a rule of economy," he told a Canadian design seminar in 1975. By the mid-'80s those rules had morphed into his influential "10 principles for good design," which were codified in a series of lectures and, later, a book, *Less but Better*. "Initially it wasn't actually intended for public release," he says. "The 10 principles were intended to correct for the dominance of business directors and their attempts to control design."

The principles took on a life of their own—some dubbed them the "10 commandments"—inspiring other designers to release their own lists in response. New York design merchant Murray Moss, who ran an influential design shop in SoHo until 2012 and has known Rams for decades, says the principles have always been misunderstood. "He did that more to stimulate conversation," he says. "He wasn't nailing a proclamation to the church door." By the time Rams was approaching retirement age in the mid-'90s, serious rifts had begun forming between him and Braun. "The direction that Braun was taking then no longer matched my vision and my convictions about design," he says. In 1995, he tells Hustwit on film, he was "pushed out and given the imposing title Executive Director—Corporate Identity." Two years later he left the company for good.

Braun struggled in the post-Rams era. Nine years ago, it brought in a young new head of design, Oliver Grabes, an industrial design professor who'd worked for Microsoft, Sony and Nike. One of the first things he did was reach out to Rams. He's been meeting with him regularly ever since. "After Dieter left, suddenly a lot of experimentation happened," says Grabes. "There wasn't one design language anymore, there were many. Every designer interpreted it differently. Nobody could tell what Braun design was anymore."

Alessandra Dolfini, Braun's current global vice president, acknowledges the change in direction. "By the time Mr. Rams left, there was an appetite for exploration and experimentation," she says. "The desire to remain contemporary and try out what was now possible led to many different design directions every time a new product was launched."

Grabes's efforts to bring Braun back onto a singular track include focusing on its old values of "functionality, simplicity and ease of use," he says. The company, under Grabes, also reintroduced a few classic pieces from Rams's time, including the 1978 ET 44 calculator that the Apple design team looked to for inspiration when creating the iPhone's calculator. "It was not an appropriation but an adulation," says Newson, "an acknowledgement that basically we couldn't do any better."

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Even before Grabes's arrival at Braun, Rams's legacy there had an impact beyond the company's design team, as it transitioned to new corporate owners following Procter & Gamble's Gillette acquisition in 2005. Bracken Darrell, who spent four years as Braun's president in that period, says learning about Rams "reordered" his "whole view of the world through design and design thinking." He later followed Rams's model when he took over consumer technology firm Logitech, transforming it into a company focused on design first. "Everything I've done since then, I've done because of Dieter Rams," Darrell says. "We created our own design principles and started staffing an internal design group like Dieter had done."

Vitsœ, meanwhile, continues to produce a small line of Rams furniture—and nothing else—from its new headquarters northwest of London, tweaking materials and production but avoiding entirely new designs (the company is thinking of reviving Rams's sling-back 601 Chair Programme, launched in 1960). "As a world we've become obsessed with the new over making things better," says company head Mark Adams, "constantly needing to talk about new things rather than saying this is one of the best, and they're still making it better. That's why we unashamedly stick to that."

Hustwit's documentary follows Rams to the Vitsœ workshop's old location in London; to a show of his modular furniture at the Vitra Design Museum near Basel, Switzerland; to his 85th birthday celebration at the Museum Angewandte Kunst in Frankfurt, which houses a portion of his archive; and to an auditorium in Munich, where he addresses design students. After some lobbying by Adams, Rams agreed to do the film, says Hustwit, to reach a new audience with his ideas on sustainability, overconsumption and enduring design. "We've never just wanted to make something beautiful," Rams tells the standing-room crowd at Munich's Technical University. "We want to make things better. What we need is less, but better." ●

GERMAN TRANSLATIONS BY JAMES GRAFF, NADJA LEONHARD-HOOPER AND LIESL SCHILLINGER