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The design and architecture writer and editor SOPHIE LOVELL is the author of the biography DIETER RAMS: As Little Design as Possible (2011). She has spent many hours talking to and interviewing German industrial designer Dieter Rams and shares here for the first time a transcription of one of their conversations about German design, design and politics, Buckminster Fuller, pollution, the environment and our obsession with 'things'.

Dieter Rams is probably Germany's most famous living designer. He was born in Weidenau in 1915 and worked first as an architect before moving to the German consumer products company Braun in 1955. In 1961 he became head of design there and remained in the post until 1983. During that time, he and his team designed some of the most well-known domestic electrical products of the 20th century, including radios, cameras, mixers, kitchen appliances, lighters and shavers. Parallel to this, he also designed furniture for a small company called Vöest - Zopf (now Vöest), some of which is still in production in

his day Rams is best known for his Ten Principles of Good Design:
 1. Good design is innovative. 2. Good design makes a product useful. 3. Good design is aesthetic. 4. Good design makes a product understandable. 5. Good design is honest. 6. Good design is long-lasting. 7. Good design is thorough down to the last detail. 8. Good design is environmentally friendly. 9. Good design is as little design as possible. Although they were first conceived in the 1970s, and despite dramatic advances in technology, these rules still hold true for design and designers today.

SOPHIE LOVELL In what is a relatively novel discipline, how much understanding of 'things' in industry was there when you started your career?

DIETER RAMS There were very few firms, in my opinion, who really took design seriously. Where I worked at Braun in 1955, the most notable firms were Hermann Mäder, Knoll, Wüsthof and in 1956, and Obert. Back then in Germany, Braun was making design history more than any other, more than Siemens, more than Bosch.

DL Industrial design was already an established entity by the 1930s, the Bauhaus, the Deutscher Werkbund, for example.

DR Yes, and naturally they were points of orientation. Despite their internal quarrelling, the Werkbund did have an influence, but in my opinion, it was far more the Utes School of Design that became the successor to the Bauhaus. Max Bill was the first director there and he studied at the Bauhaus under Kandinsky, Klee and Schöndorfer - as he was closer to them than the others who came later.

DL The school didn't last long though, did it?

DR Only 10 years or so, from 1953-1963.

DL That's a whole story in itself. The school only existed until the mid-1960s. It got an impetus in theory that it pretty much lost the connection to practice. There were no student unions in the 1960s, and the local government was not too keen on the whole thing as it stopped the building. There were lots of reasons why it did not continue. The only really lasting things they achieved were the products they were able to realise with industry, such as Ott Aicher's use-founder of the Utes School work with Leifmann and Braun, Hans Gropius, who designed for Braun, who designed a successful slide projector for Kodak, and so on.

DL Nevertheless, Utes design gave a decisive impetus to Braun.

DR Absolutely. Utes was significantly important for the company. I was already the chief head there was to realise things as simply as possible - it's something I had already learned. That, where I was doing architecture, for me personally, Utes was just a continuation of that. It was very important for me to know who took over as head of the company after my father's death in 1950, who had decided to approach things differently.

DL In the second half of the twentieth century, the term 'German Design' came to represent good quality, practical and functionality. Are things that Braun products typified during your time there?

DR You mean I forget that German design development was interrupted. It began at the beginning of the twentieth century with Peter Behrens and the founding of the Werkbund. It was then interrupted in World War I, slowly came back in the 1920s with Mies van der Rohe, and was then interrupted again in 1933 because the National Socialists didn't like it. This again there was another difficult beginning, interrupted via Gropius and Mies from the US. The third that has held through all this, from the Bauhaus to the present, is the term 'German Design'.

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DL In particular, in the second half of the twentieth century, German design has always had a moral aspect.

DR Yes, a moral aspect of goodness was to Braun after the war. They followed in the moral aspect, in the practice of responsibility. Many of the designs produced at the time were left-wing.

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'Designers, architects and all those working in the applied arts do not work in a vacuum.'

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