





# Karl Lagerfeld, Boy Prince of Fashion

( By Vanessa Grigoriadis )

**D**own Fifth Avenue they come, the fragrant and bejeweled hordes, having said their *bons mots* at Derek Lam's cocktail party at Barneys and a Tom Ford perfume launch at Saks, and now clippity-clopping their way ever closer to the opening of the exquisite new Fendi boutique on 53rd Street. It is 8 P.M., still early enough for tourists to stroll about and city buses to zoom by, and also too early for the arrival of Karl Lagerfeld, designer of Chanel, Fendi, Lagerfeld Collection, a new Karl Lagerfeld line, and "the reason we are all here!" Half an hour before the

event is supposed to end, Lagerfeld remains at his suite at the Mercer, and it's whispered that he will not leave because he cannot find a thing to wear. Soon, Silvia Fendi, the handsome blonde daughter of the LVMH-owned house, is packed in a Town Car and sent downtown to work some magic, or at least appeal to Lagerfeld's nobler side, because Lagerfeld is nothing if not noble.

What can one talk about while waiting for Lagerfeld? Lagerfeld, of course. "Karl has the energy of... what? Twenty-five thousand Turkish elephants!" says socialite Anne Slater, wearing her big blue glasses and grinning up a storm. "He's magnetic and powerful. I think he's absolutely, devastatingly attractive."

"At our dinner for Karl at Schiller's, firemen had to stand at the door to stop people from coming in because everyone wanted to see him," says Robert Burke, the recently departed Bergdorf Goodman head of fashion. "Karl said the firemen were the best-dressed people from the whole evening!"

"Karl is a genius!" exclaims Lindsay Lohan, whose name has been lobbed recently as the new face of Chanel ("I prefer Nicole Kidman and that generation at the moment," Lagerfeld later tells me drily). "I want to have everything that he makes. Everything! I go into stores and grab all his things."

"Karl is the one person that makes me shy," says throaty Bungalow 8 owner Amy Sacco. "I think I've conquered—I've run the gamut on people that I speak to, and very few times have I been shy. But Karl is beyond, and I'm afraid I'd bore him to tears."

Giorgio Armani, André Leon Talley, Anna Wintour with her pretty daughter, Bee. "A conversation with Karl is not a fashion conversation—it's a *conversation*, a conversation that embraces the culture of life,"

says Talley. Amanda Cutter Brooks, Celerie Kemble, Anh Duong. "Karl defended me once. He said, 'Do not forget that Anh is not only a beautiful woman but also an artist!'" exclaims Duong. Sophie Dahl, Cecilia Dean, Liv Tyler. "I'm starting to feel a little tired and overwhelmed, and I wonder if I slip out if anyone would notice," lisps Tyler, with one of her coy half-smiles. An emissary from Planet Not Obsessed With Karl: Chuck Close plants his wheelchair two inches from the exit door. "I'm not very interested in fashion," says Close, surveying the crowd. He sighs. "This event is making me want to start smoking again."

But then there he is—Karl! His stiff silver tie glitters like a saber. His black leather gloves are good for murder. He poses for the cameras wearing a ghastly grimace, an entourage of twenty Frenchmen and foxes waiting behind. Guests with fingers curled around champagne glasses jostle to catch a glimpse, not quite crying the way they did in

*Karl Lagerfeld at the Chanel headquarters in Paris.*



Tokyo last year at the opening of the biggest Chanel store in the world, but certainly eager to be entertained. "I think his hair is powdered, like from the 1800s," says one socialite. "In fact, it is from the 1800s," titters her friend. Paparazzi are yelling "Karl!" and bystanders are yelling "Karl!" and PETA is yelling "Karl!" the loudest. A dreadlocked white guy with Rollerblades slung over his shoulder streaks down the sidewalk and snarls, "Blood for money, that's what Karl Lagerfeld wants. Karl is greedy! Karl is evil! Karl is wicked! Karl is... the devil!"

Lagerfeld stops in the doorway, puckering his bulbous German lips, which is what he does when he is mad—well, not mad, exactly, but frustrated with other people, who, he has found, are frequently idiots. "You eat meat and wear leather, so shut up," he says to a German reporter. "I have no time for zis foolishness."

LAGERFELD IS TOO busy, too smart, and too old to be brought into any foolishness, at least not that which is not of his own making. At 67—or 72, if the 1933 birth date on a baptismal record unearthed by German tabloids is to be believed—he is one of the most professionally self-realized people alive, keeping busy with an incredible twelve or so collections each year, an extensive photography career, a Paris-based bookshop, personal museum-quality furniture collections, the management of six homes, and staying skinny. Lagerfeld lost 90 pounds four years ago on a low-calorie diet—his book on the subject was a best seller in Europe—and has put on ten or so since. The new, skinny Karl is an improved Karl. The creepy fat guy hiding behind a fan has been replaced by a boogying hipster who hangs out with Stephen Gan and Hedi Slimane. "My people are zee cool ones, the rockers," says Lagerfeld. "I get along with everyone except for men my age, who are bourgeois or retired or boring, and cannot follow the evolution of time and mood."

As much as Lagerfeld would like to ignore his association with such men—and aging and death in general—his role as a vital elder statesman has much to do with his importance in the world of fashion. He is the King of Fashion, if you will, though he would prefer to be called its eternal Prince. Lagerfeld is the last of the old-world couturiers, with Valentino his only remaining contemporary, and the last of the big high-fashion names, with Yves Saint Laurent in retirement, Tom Ford in transition, and Helmut Lang disappeared. He is also a terrific pop cartoon—a scolding great-uncle, Dave Navarro the elder, the S&M George Washington. His look is an extremely conscious metaphor for his philosophy of fashion and life: Here, watch as I bring together



*The Chanel spring-  
summer 2006  
haute couture runway  
show in Paris.*

the old, in my tall eighteenth-century collar and bizarre powdered hair, with the new, as seen in my ponytail and \$2,500 Agatha leather pants, “the most expensive leather pants in the world,” he declares, with a laugh exactly like Count Chocula’s in its length and ridiculousness. Without the indecipherable French-German accent, he would be made for reality TV, although one would think he’d resist on grounds that philistines should not even be aware that he exists. His iconography grows and grows: first, menacing larger-than-life portraits at H&M; then, Los Angeles’s Museum of Contemporary Art gift shop, where one could buy a pin with his face on it.

“In the whole world, there is nowhere I can go,” says Lagerfeld, in a tone that should have him fluttering that old fan. “Everybody has a camera, and it is flash-flash-flash, and I am a puppet, a marionette, Mickey at Disneyland for children to play with. In Japan, they touch me. I have Japanese women pinch my ass, so now I must say, ‘You can have the photo, but please don’t touch me.’ You cannot pinch the ass of a man my age! And I cannot go out without something for my eyes, because someone might throw chemicals in my face, and I would be like my childhood French teacher whose wife burnt him with acid, Mr. Pommes-Frites, can you believe the name. I can cross the street nowhere in the world, I can never go into a shop. Oh, it’s horrible, horrible.” Lagerfeld, the master of the contrapuntal, grins a bit and then whispers, “In fact, I do like it. It’s very flattering, and very fun.”

THE PLACE WHERE LAGERFELD will likely be fending off excitable fans next is New York, though he will not say so directly. “I can tell you all sort of bullshit, but I work

# “My only ambition in life,” says Lagerfeld, “is to wear size 28 jeans.”

only from feelings and motivations and creations and needs and opportunities,” he declares. Nevertheless, last year, while working on the show of Chanel couture at the Met, he bought one of the John Pawson-designed apartments in Ian Schrager’s updated Gramercy Park Hotel, which he will decorate only with German design from 1905 to 1915 and move into in April. “I must have a key to the park, because you know I cannot walk in the street,” he says. (Of the Met show, Lagerfeld says, “I do not care if they say I was a Fascist and all this—if you did not like it, you could have walked out.”) Lagerfeld has been spending a lot of time here these days, making a trip about every six weeks, to stay at the Mercer, dine at diet-friendly restaurants like Omen, and occasionally go to nightclubs where young people ask him to sign their clothes with Sharpies. “I like New York these days,” he says. “At least the way I see it, it is perfect, though I am not down in the streets, so don’t ask me about that. I like how the people don’t call me by Monsieur here. It’s always just the first name—Karl!”

Lagerfeld also now has offices in New York, since he sold Lagerfeld Gallery—re-

cently renamed Lagerfeld Collection—to Tommy Hilfiger for \$30 million (Hilfiger has no creative say). It was all very sudden, says Hilfiger: “I was at Karl’s home in Paris, and we were telling each other our dreams. I said, ‘You know, I would like to buy another brand.’ He said, ‘Buy mine.’” And why not? It may have beefed up Hilfiger’s December sale to Apex Partners, and who owns what and what they plan to do is of little interest to Lagerfeld, who intends to do exactly what he wants regardless. “Groups are groups,” he says, with a wave of his hand.

One very good thing Lagerfeld got out of the Hilfiger deal was some of the most stunning office space in New York, on the seventeenth floor of the Starrett-Lehigh Building. Lagerfeld’s true nature is revealed in his walk, a curious, energetic bourrée performed on the balls of his feet, and on a recent afternoon he dashes to and fro in the offices, drinking in the stunning Hudson River-to-Empire State Building views. “Dee-vvine,” he pronounces, to the tiny claps of assistants (*divine* is one of Lagerfeld’s favorite words, never used ironically). “I must be in Milan, Paris, and New York. To show in one city is a problem, because you cannot go to every party the same night. You cannot dance on every bar. But you can dance in different cities on different bars. I think that is the modern way, and I am organized for it.”

The organization of which he speaks is a support system of a half-dozen image-makers, casting directors, public-relations officers, and graphic designers who travel the world with him, hooking up with creative satellites to consult on projects. Today in the studio, there’s Stephen Gan and *Harper’s Bazaar* senior fashion editor Melanie Ward, consultants on Lagerfeld

1969



1974



1978



1983



1995



PHOTOGRAPHS BY: REGINALD GREY/WOMEN'S WEAR DAILY (1969); MICHEL MAUROU/WOMEN'S WEAR DAILY (1974); GUY MARINEAU/WOMEN'S WEAR DAILY (1978); THOMAS IANNACCONE/WOMEN'S WEAR DAILY (1983); WOMEN'S WEAR DAILY ARCHIVE (1995)



Lagerfeld photographing his new collection in Coco Chanel's old apartment.

Collection and the Karl Lagerfeld line, which includes denim and T-shirts and will be sold in top-tier department stores beginning in March. As with Chanel and Fendi, Lagerfeld controls every aspect of the clothing and image-making, from the sketches and dress-making to the photography and concept of the ad campaign. The team follows him from city to city like a rap star's posse. Their look is sleek Euro professional, all with close shaves, slim-cut sport jackets, and starched collars. Most wear some sort of chunky silver Chrome Hearts jewelry, a Lagerfeld obsession since he met co-designer Laurie Stark at a fashion show and she bent over in her leather pants to show him the tartan letters spelling KARL across her butt. Today Lagerfeld wears a sterling-silver belt of the American flag with the Pledge of Allegiance engraved on the back—"Dee-vine!"—and a pendant around his neck. He unscrews it to reveal a stack of seaweed pills and pops one in his mouth.

"Our job is to be the team of Karl," declares Lagerfeld Collection publicist Caroline LeBar, an imposing Frenchwoman in Libertine suits and one of Lagerfeld's long-term protectors ("I do not like strangers," he explains). Over a catered sushi lunch—Lagerfeld sits apart from the group, waving a silver fork over pineapple and asparagus in Chinese-takeout boxes that are, oddly, colored black—a member of his team talks

“Everybody has a camera, and it’s flash-flash-flash. I am a puppet, a marionette, Mickey at Disneyland.”

about Lagerfeld's recent photo shoot with Christina Aguilera. "She is horrible!" she exclaims. "She did not even kiss Karl goodbye. She just sticks out her head from the door, 'Bye!'"

"Oh, well," I say. "She is a pop star."

"Karl is a pop star," she declares.

On the roof for the photo shoot, it is perfectly mild, and the city seems at peace, with helicopters floating overhead and boats moving slowly down the river. An androgynous model climbs onto a fire escape in a Lagerfeld Collection floor-length black dress cut down the center, fluttering in the wind. It's inspired by the clothes that Lagerfeld

began to wear when he got skinny: skintight pants and long vampiric frock-coats, all Berlin all the time. "A little young Bonaparte!" says Lagerfeld of the model, whispering with Gan. "She is beautiful, but as a model she has a flaw. Her legs are too short. But nobody notices. How perfect she is for this! How divine!"

The model turns her angular body into the sun, and you can see the outline of a tattoo down her belly through the gauzy fabric. "I want to see it—it looks like lacing," Lagerfeld tells Ward. "Now, I have nothing against tattoo, as long as I don't have to put it on my body. And her nose-pierce, well, we can move with a computer, though I don't know if you have a cold if it is very pleasant. Some of them have pierces in the nipples also—and uh-oh—in other areas too!" He laughs his Count Chocula laugh and shakes his head. "That's modern."

FOR ALL HIS interest in being modern, Lagerfeld can be quite old-fashioned. He does not drive or use a cell phone, nor does he smoke, drink, or take drugs. He takes great solace in the proprieties of social life and is always telling everyone what can and cannot be done. For example, there were plans for a dinner at LVMH head Bernard

Arnault's new Manhattan apartment after the Fendi store opening, but Lagerfeld squashed them upon hearing that Arnault's mother had died. "They say it is an apartment Arnault has not yet lived in so it is okay, but I say you cannot go to somebody's private house without him, knowing that his mother is dead, sitting there eating his food—no, no, one cannot do this," declares Lagerfeld. With those who are refined, he is refined—"Karl is a great storyteller, a gentleman, and a true wit," says Nicole Kidman. "Working with him and dining with him are equal pleasures"—and with those who are not, he is delighted to be naughty. Says Helena Christensen, "At a shoot with all these important clients around, he will whisper some really perverted joke in my ear, or say, 'Did you see her breasts, her on the left? Or him, look at him, isn't it perverted how he is pushing his torso towards us?'" Lagerfeld socializes with royalty, like Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles, and fits right in. "The public does not know who Camilla is," he declares. "She is the life of the party! She's sparkling, she's witty, she's ready for everything, and not pretentious, not one bit. If you had to make a choice to live with somebody, this is the one." Of Princess Diana, he says, "She was pretty and she was sweet, but she was stupid."

Before he ruled the world of fashion, Lagerfeld was a pampered little prince. The heir to a German condensed-milk fortune, he was raised on a 12,000-acre estate near the Danish border. At 4, he insisted on having his own valet because he liked to change clothes several times a day. The family remained on the estate during World War II, suffering no casualties or hardships; Lagerfeld insists that he barely even knew there was a war. But all was not sunshine and rainbows. His mother was a villain and her crimes many: He was not allowed to chatter on when talking to her, because "you may be 6 years old, but I am not"; she refused to let him wear glasses although he was shortsighted, saying, "Children with glasses are the ugliest thing in the world"; she scolded him for smoking as a teenager, because "if you smoke, you show the hands, and as yours are not beautiful... you should not." Among Mater's few judicious comments was that homosexuality was "nothing, just like hair color, some are black and some are blonde, who cares," and this Lagerfeld repeats with some pride. He doesn't talk about his sexual orientation and maintains that he never had sexual congress with the man he calls the love of his life, the Parisian "It" dandy Jacques de Bascher, who called Lagerfeld "Mein Kaiser" and died of AIDS in 1989. When Lagerfeld says he "hated the nineties, for some reasons," it is code for many miser-



Choosing accessories for the Paris-New York collection.

able years suffering with a broken heart, partially expressed by naming his Hellenic-inspired villa in Hamburg "Jako," an amalgam of their names, and briefly selling a perfume of the same appellation. In fact, De Bascher was the reason Lagerfeld gained weight to begin with. He writes in *The Karl Lagerfeld Diet* that directly before De Bascher's death, "I started to lose interest in my appearance, because I knew what was going to happen. I lost interest in myself and trivial matters. I felt old-fashioned in my proper made-to-measure Italian clothes. I started to buy my clothes from Matsuda, Comme des Garçons, and Yohji Yamamoto. I went from small to medium, medium to large, then to extra-large."

When Gan and Slimane met Lagerfeld, six or seven years ago, he was extra-large, and in fashion circles there is no question that the new friendships—and what is whispered to be an obsession with Slimane—sparked Lagerfeld's desire to lose weight. About six months after Gan introduced Slimane to Lagerfeld, Lagerfeld greeted Gan at his Paris studio in a Dior Homme tie. "The tie was unusually narrow for his width at the time," says Gan. "He said, 'Look! I'm wearing your friend's tie!'" Six months later in Paris, Lagerfeld was wearing a Dior Homme jacket, and six months later it was the pants. "I have never felt an age differentiation with Karl—hanging out with him is like hanging out with a buddy," says Gan, who is about 30 years his junior. "Now he shops for clothes the way some people shop for chocolates."

Says Lagerfeld, "My only ambition in life is to wear size 28 jeans."

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T 14—or, you know, 19—Lagerfeld moved in with a family friend in Paris, a woman who had been his mother's vendeuse at Molyneux. Two years later, in 1954, he entered a con-

test sponsored by the International Wool Secretariat and won the prize for a coat (Yves Saint Laurent won in the dress category). He began his career in the couture studios of Pierre Balmain, where he learned dress-making methods of the twenties and thirties before becoming the head designer of Patou. Fashion was a good job for him, his mother said—"It shows you have no pretension or ambition." While Kenzo and Saint Laurent built empires, Lagerfeld remained under the radar, designing for Krizia and Charles Jourdan in the early sixties and Chloé and Fendi in the seventies. "Lagerfeld is not a designer, he's a mercenary" is the famous kiss-off by Pierre Bergé, Saint Laurent's former business partner-majordomo-lover. In 1983, Lagerfeld was hired by Chanel's corporate head, Alain Wertheimer, to reinvent the Chanel brand, moribund since Coco's death in 1971. He promised to be modern. "Respect is not creative," he told Wertheimer, according to Jane Kramer in *Vogue*. "Chanel is an institution, and you have to treat an institution like a whore—and then you get something out of her."

In the same way that Lagerfeld's collection for H&M made it safe for Stella McCartney and other high-fashion designers to go downmarket, his vast accomplish-

ments at Chanel have set the standard for all the old European houses frantically trying to reinvigorate aging brands with a hot young designer—Alber Elbaz at Lanvin, Olivier Theyskens at Rochas. No other designer has been able to exploit a house's legacy in quite the same way as Lagerfeld, and it has been said that Chanel, owned by the press-averse Wertheimer family, is the largest luxury company in the world, with annual revenues of more than \$4 billion.

Fashion people will tell you about Lagerfeld's "weird psychic connection" with Coco Chanel and how he "channeled Coco" to reinvent the brand, but Lagerfeld does not wear Chanel himself. "In Chanel, I look like my mother," he says, grimacing. Like his mother, Coco Chanel was master of the grand pronouncement—"Luxury is not the opposite of poverty, but the opposite of vulgarity" was perhaps her most famous aphorism. Chanel, the fabled orphan-grisette-demimondaine-superstar, is credited with inventing modern style in the 1910s with simple, uncorseted dressing, giving rise to the little black dress, bouclé jacket, and later accoutrements like red lipstick, a perpetual tan, and Chanel No. 5. After surviving the scandal that she spent World War II at Paris's Ritz with a Nazi boyfriend—"Really, a woman my age cannot be expected to look at his passport if she has a chance of a lover," she explained—she staged a slow but solid comeback in the fifties, but her selfish nature and disappointment in love eventually got the better of her, and she died a bitter spinster.

Lagerfeld is determined to end his life differently. He says he will not participate in retrospectives of his work, create any foundations, write an autobiography, or keep archives. "I do not like funerals, and I do not want anyone to come to mine," he says. "Do what you want with the ashes. Send them down the garbage chute." Nevertheless, he seems to like talking about death an awful lot. The top book on his nightstand is Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, which he declares, of course, divine. "I have finished it three times in less than a month!" he says. He bangs the table repeatedly as he begins to count off the age of death of his ancestors—two grandparents at 98 and 100; his father at almost 90; and his mother at 82, killed by her own fidelity to propriety. "The doctor told her she must stay in bed, but instead she got her hair done and when he arrived, crossed the room to greet him at the door, dying there," he says. "Also I had a godfather who lived to 104, and his brother to 102, and their mother to 108. When my godfather died, he was totally normal, chic and everything. He got up early and dressed every day. After

"I get along with everyone except for men my age, who are bourgeois or retired or boring."

lunch he slept one hour and walked one hour afterwards." He stops banging on the table, and leans back in his chair. "That is a long time they lived," he says softly. "They saw a lot. I would like to see as much."

PARIS IN THE wintertime, raw and windy. Lagerfeld is no longer leasing his eighteenth-century hotel particulier, site of countless galas and unforgettable private dinners. Now he lives in a long, narrow, glassed-in apartment on Quai Voltaire—"like a space in the hospital for early-born babies," he says—that he has furnished with postmillennial furniture by Ronan and Erwan Bouroullec and Marc Newson. He does not want to be owned by things, he says. In the past decade and a half, he has sold off his eighteenth-century-furniture collection (\$21.7 million), his collection of the Italian postmodern design group Memphis (\$280,000), and Art Deco pieces (\$4 million), as well as the château in Brittany where his mother and De Bascher are buried. "In the future, I want only apartments like hotel suites," he says. "I want to be light. I want nothing." The riots are going on, and Lagerfeld doesn't want to talk about them. Paris is dreary, mired in the past. "Now they make the ugliest sixties building landmarked," he says. "The Chanel building on Avenue Montaigne is the ugliest building in the world, all I want is to see it go, but they do nothing. You never hide against progress, because then you will be lost."

The Chanel-headquarters building on Rue Cambon is a bit mired in the past as well, although Lagerfeld had the salon renovated in 2002. The modernist beauty of the ground-floor boutique, filled with happy Asian and American customers, disappears in the offices, where thin girls in pedal pushers sit at cramped desks, pounding on keyboards. "They do not wear these pants in America yet?" asks an assistant, laughing. "In a few months, they will." Another sign of olden

times: a butler, whose entire job seems to be carrying a platter that holds a crystal goblet filled with Pepsi Max expressly for Karl.

Lagerfeld is fitting his Paris–New York collection, a new line that he has added to Chanel's five collections a year because he knows the Chanel customer can bear it, that they will buy almost anything he sells (in the boutique, a cloth coat was priced at 36,814 euros, and there was only one left). The mannequins cabines, young girls with bodies more terrifying than Nicole Richie's, put on dresses behind filmy curtains as Lagerfeld makes tiny adjustments. Devendra Banhart, an American neo-folk singer Lagerfeld has taken under his wing, hangs around waiting to be fitted in a suit he will wear to perform in the show. "How about if I wear just my underwear?" he asks.

"Oh-ho!" says Lagerfeld.

Chanel's high-energy Belgian accessories designer dashes about wearing multiple scarves and belts and fake earrings from the collection, trying to get Lagerfeld's attention. "Look at these!" she says, shaking to make things jingle. "How beautiful!"

"*Jadore!*" exclaims Lagerfeld. "If you go out to a nightclub like this, the ladies will go crazy for it. *Très jolie, très New York.*"

Throwing on three rhinestone bracelets and sticking her hands into a white fur muff, she vamps across the room. "I look great," she says. "I resemble—"

"You resemble an American!" he says.

She puffs out her cheeks. "When do we eat?" she asks.

"Oh, la!" laughs Lagerfeld.

Lagerfeld rarely shows up at Chanel before late afternoon, and it is eight when he begins taking the photos for the collection's press packet in Mademoiselle's old flat, preserved as she left it on the office's top floor—the Coromandel screens, Oriental tables, the quilted suede sofa, a silver box lined in gold (a gift from one of her lovers, the Duke of Westminster). The models in their forties-era New York looks parade through Coco's suites, and the shoot extends for hours, far past midnight, and afterward Lagerfeld insists on writing captions for each shot with Chanel's Parisian publicist. "Please tell him that captions are not modern," she begs me.

Lagerfeld summons the butler for his Pepsi Max and waits for his camera to be reloaded. "Marc Jacobs and all, they will have to wait," he declares from the couch, sitting down for the first time all night. "This is not an easy job, because I have the understanding about Chanel and couture design that nobody has anymore. I have the training that nobody else has. This job is not free." He takes a sip from his goblet. "I am not going anywhere." ■

*Additional reporting by Jada Yuan.*