



# Why Karl Lagerfeld Walked Away

His much-hyped new line with Tommy Hilfiger may have gone bust, but the esteemed designer is keeping his chin above his high-collar shirt and taking the setback in stride

Text by Phoebe Eaton

Photographs by Simon Procter

It was perhaps inevitable that an idea guy like Karl Lagerfeld would find himself in New York and, like so many pilgrims before him, see opportunity beckoning through the smog. Class shook hands with mass when Chanel and Fendi's own designing Oz struck a deal last year with Tommy Hilfiger to create a namesake clothing line; this past winter, the Karl Lagerfeld collection debuted in a gabled dance studio Karl had discovered while house hunting in downtown Manhattan.

Karl was standing around backstage in Uggs custom-dyed in black when Chanel centerfold Daria Werbowy came over to kiss the boss's ring. The paparazzi flapped about like parakeets: "*Karl! Big smile! Big cuddle!*"

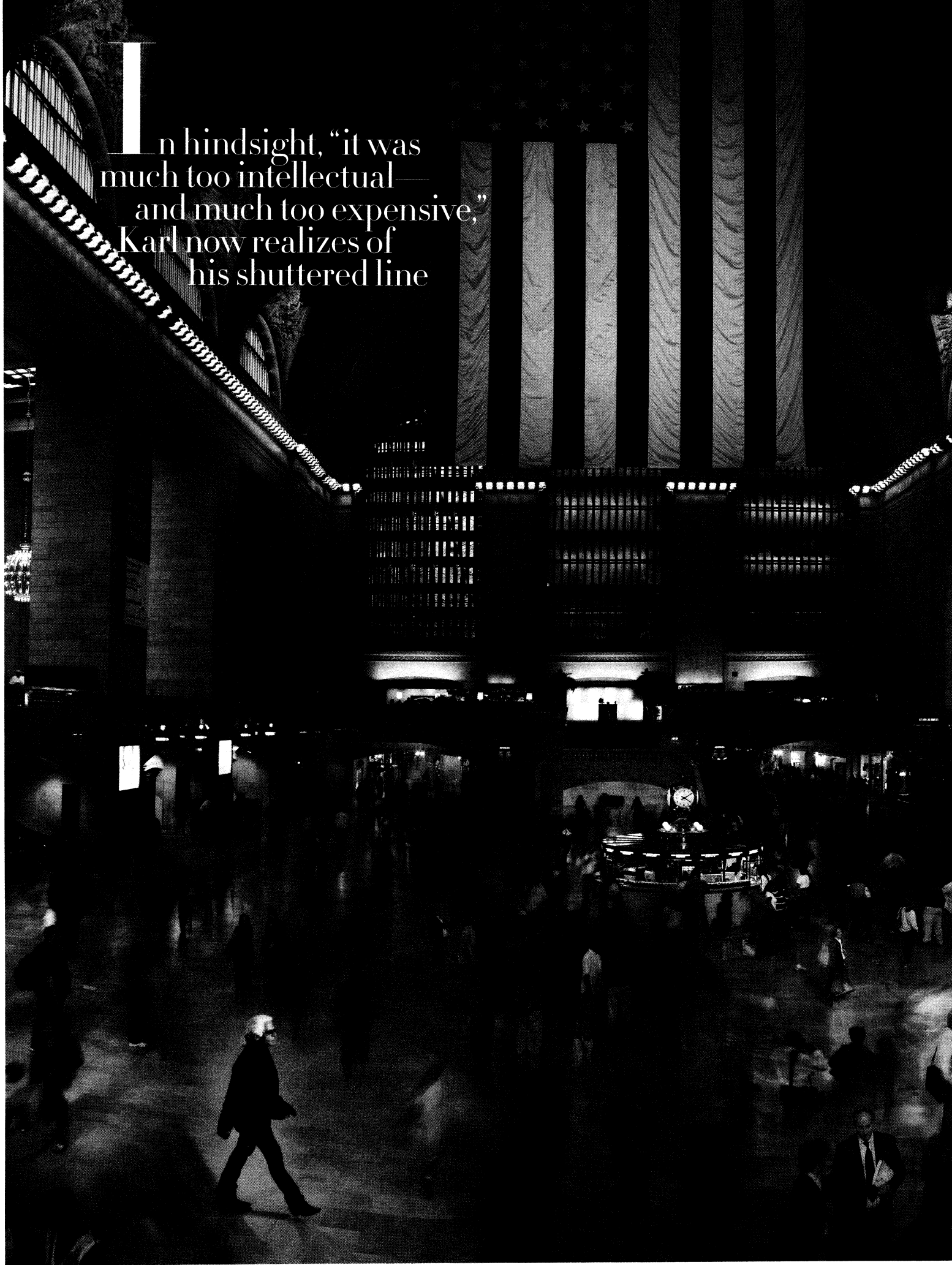
"I never smile," said Karl, who likes to fence with the press in several languages. There was fun in that ruffly prom shirt tucked into a pair of alternative-rocker black jeans, but it was corked for the time being by a stiff regimental collar ensuring the wearer's elegant fused-vertebrae posture and (not incidentally) a buttressed jawline. He was the Marquis de Mod, an exotic hybrid of old and new, both thumbs hooked about a gem-encrusted Old Glory belt buckle sparkling with irony. Suddenly, a smile broke loose for the cameras.

The Big Cuddle that night between Karl and the winking metropolis of New York City signaled a serious, committed relationship, even after Tommy Hilfiger's surprise new owner decided to shutter Lagerfeld's new line in June.

It was midnight, and Karl had laid down Bette Davis's biography to take stock of all that had happened, why ►

Always one to cut his own path—Lagerfeld amid the masses at Grand Central Station. Fashion editor: Melanie Ward

In hindsight, "it was much too intellectual—and much too expensive," Karl now realizes of his shuttered line



the department-store buyers hadn't fallen for his puffed and flounced knitwear, Mongol-herder coats, storm-trooper trenches, and droopy pirate boots, the moth-bitten scarves and dresses that knot like sweaters around waists. Most everything text-mesaged URBAN, BRUTALIST, BLACK, and inspiration pointed to things past, "the mystery part of Northern Europe. Vikings. Heroines from Ibsen and Strindberg," said Karl. "Not boring." A zealous design team had unearthed Viking runes on the Internet, and Karl's name had been glyphed across a few male-model shirtfronts.

In hindsight, "it was much too intellectual—and much too expensive," Karl now realizes. Tommy hadn't even told him the whole shebang was for sale, says Karl, and when Hilfiger's new owner, the private-equity powerhouse Apax Partners, ordered up cutbacks, Lagerfeld's own pricey fledgling operation in New York was a sitting duck.

But Apax isn't through with Karl by any means; the line is understood to be on hiatus, with Karl expected to whip up some "optimistic" ready-to-wear in Paris, which would eventually head down the runway accompanied by some jeans and T-shirts. It's what Karl says he wanted all along. He calls what happened "a healthy solution."

"I'm not crying for a company even if it has my own name. For this, I have no pity with whatever happened to Baby Jane," he says. He may yet show again in New York, where the business side will still be headquartered, in some new Chelsea digs, more convenient to quality licensees who can put his name on everything from sunglasses to settees.

"New York is the world center!" he is still convinced.

This is a fairly recent epiphany. In the late '60s and '70s, New York "was careless and even funny. It was another planet," says Karl. Then AIDS came and sucked the oxygen out of the '80s. His longtime companion died, and the mood everywhere turned acrid. "Fashion had a fleshy look. The models looked middle-aged. I didn't like the clothes. I didn't like the skirt lengths. I didn't like the shoes. I hated my life in the '80s. I hated everything, no?" (Even at age 67—or 72, as a birth record

dredged up by a German tabloid appears to indicate—Karl has the disarming, teenagerly tic of inflecting many an observation as an interrogative.)

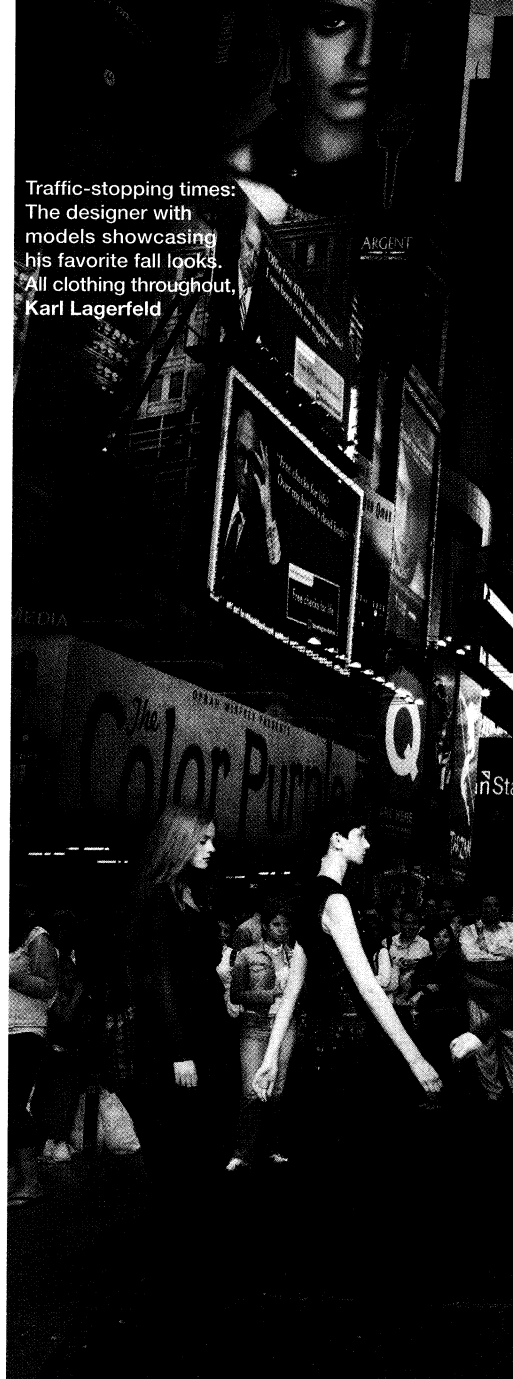
New York's nightlife revived, and its restaurants—its very sidewalks—pulse with fresh intrigue, which is why he's bought an apartment there. One recent evening, strolling back to his SoHo hotel, Karl found himself being tracked by a Land Rover. "We love you Karl!" screamed a car seat lined with 16-year-old homegirls. At a Halloween party Fendi tossed downtown to celebrate its 80th anniversary, several guests came in Karl costumes. This amused him: "I may be a cartoon, but I'm a cartoon on purpose. I have no ego at all. I laugh at myself."

**B**y now, Karl was kind of commuting to New York, a ponytailed action figure shooting ad campaigns and magazine spreads, taking meetings related to his Paris bookstore and publishing operation, and in the evenings, contriving to meet up with new friends like Lindsay Lohan for dinner at Matsuri, Mr. Chow Tribeca, or La Esquina, a basement speakeasy serving "divi-i-ine grilled green beans."

His driver would sometimes pull up on Broadway at the Strand's ancient bookstalls (the subway long banned by order of Karl's psychic Madame Serakian, a now-deceased stunner with all-seeing turquoise eyes). Or Karl would browse the vast art galleries of Chelsea with Ingrid Sischy, editor of *Interview* magazine, where Karl and his camera are gradually assuming Andy Warhol's role as court painter to the celebrities. Up in the Bowery Ballroom balcony on one recent sortie, he recharged in a room fibrillating to the glam-rock sounds of the Scissor Sisters, whose hit single "Comfortably Numb" was downloaded on one of his 100 iPods.

Karl has been cleaning out the drawers of an antiquated lifestyle. In Paris he is bolting his Left Bank manse ("there were rooms I never went into for months") for more austere arrangements on the Quai Voltaire—and he may shed the Biarritz beach house too. His New York address will be the old Gramercy Park Hotel, still being boned

Traffic-stopping times: The designer with models showcasing his favorite fall looks. All clothing throughout, Karl Lagerfeld



and filleted by Ian Schrager and maxi-minimalist John Pawson. Spooked by September 11, Karl didn't want to live too high over the green outside, whose vibe is admittedly nanny and pram, "but not *bourgeois* like uptown can be and not too freaky like downtown can be," says Karl, adding that Stieglitz the photographer had been drawn to the neighborhood too.

Karl's busy stateside schedule has thwarted invitations to guest on *Saturday Night Live*, to have a seat on Oprah Winfrey's cathode couch. But he did manage to squeeze in a spot on *The Charlie Rose Show*. Charlie deemed Karl "a wonderful conversationalist."



"Karl remembers things about you. He can talk about anything. He's an incredible human being," says Daria Werbowy. In his lifetime, Karl has fed his head with more than 200,000 books but claims he finds intellectual nattering reprehensible. "I like to be informed, know everything, but for my own household use," he says, doing his best to make Emily Dickinson, Dorothy Parker, and Heidegger (all of whom came up in conversation) sound like names of competing laundry detergents. Still, years of late-night fittings with models recently freed from braces and pig-tails have made him fluent in adolescence and its obsessions, an accomplishment for

someone with only a dim awareness of "Güggle" and no cell phone or e-mail, who eschews television because he can't stand hearing voices in his house.

"I've just been adopted by Karl Lagerfeld. It's so amazing," says Lindsay Lohan, who announced to the world that she was wearing Chanel when she hosted *Saturday Night Live* not long ago. ("She's somebody you want to protect, because she plays dangerously with her own life," explains Karl, who coyly adds that to designate Lindsay the face of Chanel, as has been rumored, would only tick off Madame Kidman, to whom he is lashed by contract.) "I love it when Karl says, *so chic so chic so chic*," says

Lohan. Karl keeps her picture on the credit-card-size Sony "diary camera" he is in the habit of carrying. (Before she died, Karl's long-dead German mother—a formidable personality who still rides shotgun in his thoughts—famously consigned her only child's schoolboy journals to the dustbin. "Nobody has to know you were that stupid," she told him.)

Andy Warhol was also a compulsive diarist. Karl knew Andy, starred in one of his let's-make-a-movies, "which, thank *God*, nobody can see," he says. Both behaved like extras on the set of Studio 54, ducking the scene's alcohol and drugs. ("You know, I am a Puritan, but I don't really like ►



people like me," Karl says. For others, he insists he's "beyond permissive.") Andy was a voyeur—and Karl is too. "But Andy pushed people. I'm not somebody who pushes people," says Karl. Sure, he wrapped Mariah Carey in a Saran-sheer window curtain at a Beverly Hills Hotel shoot. "But it wasn't sexual," Carey insists. "It was a couture moment." Now her people have been faxing sketches to his people in hopes that Karl will clothe Mariah In Concert.

When Karl was in short pants, American women were considered *the* most beautiful, known to have the best legs, he says. But now, with every culture in the Cuisinart, "the famous American leg exists all over the world. Angela Lindvall has *zis* kind of leg, but you don't see tons of them, eh? You see a lot of champagne bottles upside down, eh?" (I bade Karl assure me that I had not inherited my legs from Dom Pérignon.)

Karl can be the Simon Cowell of high fashion when he's in the mood, and the names of tabloid superstars make for some acute free association. Angelina Jolie: "Stunningly beautiful. She has the kind of mouth other people pay to get." Jessica Simpson: "*Ecch*. I'm not that impressed. I'm not that interested. I'm not that impressed." The Olsen twins: "They don't have a strong enough image. They still have to make the movie that everybody remembers." Does he find them a tad frumpy? "*Extreemely*."

Lindsay Lohan he pronounced "very touching as a person." Karl and Lindsay met at a Fendi event. "She behaves like an over-grown-up person, and that's what I like about her. It's like she's 45, but *in fact*, she's 20."

As Americans find it difficult to explain France's romance with Jerry Lewis, Karl is perplexed by some aspects of American life. *America's Next Top Model* and *Project Runway* are "trash that is funny for five minutes if you're with other people. If you're alone, it's not funny. Those girls will never be the new Gemma Ward. There is no justice in the fashion business."

Karl was back in New York, ready for antidepressants after a layover in Las Vegas. For starters, there was that garish ceiling-mounted blown glass, an umbrella



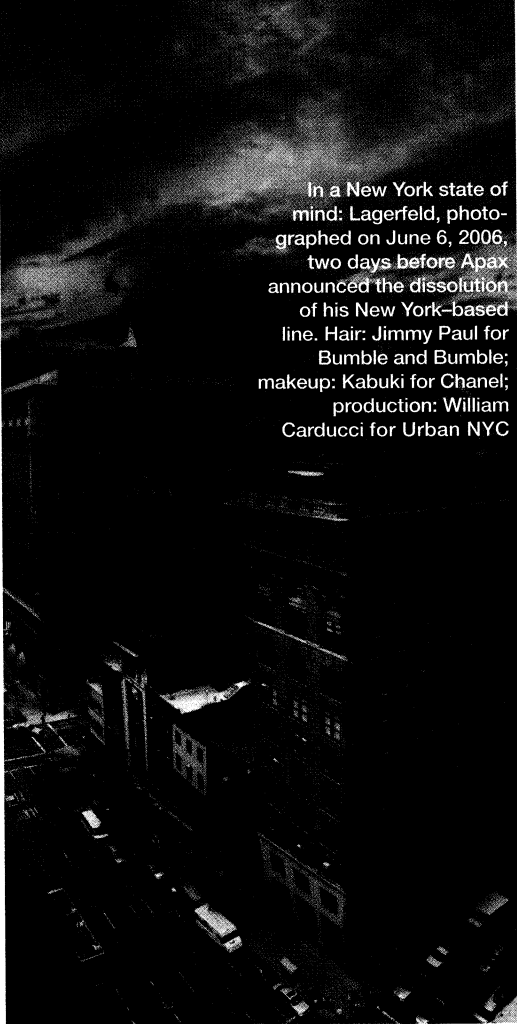
over the lobby of his hotel, the Bellagio, which he called "the height of bad taste."

"I never saw so many big men and big women in unbecoming T-shirts and ugly shorts, which give them the worst proportion," says Karl, stretched across a white canvas couch at a Chelsea photo studio and twirling a leather lanyard trailing from his designer jeans seemingly sewn by a Sasquatch. "They were monsters. *Monsters!*" At 8 in the morning, he was scandalized to see a line had already formed in front of a certain Vegas chocolate shop. That the cash registers at Chanel and Dior and Fendi were singing in three-part harmony confused him; he simply could not imagine who in town would fit into these clothes.

Gemma Ward walked out of the bathroom wearing a pair of Agatha-brand jeans, "the most expensive jeans in the *woooooorld*," Karl likes to croon with a game-show-host's appreciation. Today, he was giving them away. "I must say they look great on you, Gemma. I never thought we could have the same size," said Karl. (Nor did anyone else in the room.) The other

day, he'd come across an old pair of denim shorts from the '60s. "I could hardly believe I dared to cross the street in something like *zis*," he said, laughing. Low-riders like the ones he was handing off to Ward hadn't yet been invented. "I'm a little too old to have the ass out," said Karl, grinning. "There are limits to everything, eh?"

**A**bout five years ago, Karl lost about 90 pounds (noting some etiolation in the face, he recently gained 10 back). Coworkers insist that he did not endure liposuction, as rumored. His low-carb-diet book, published in the United States last year, also attributes his successful shrinkage to various skin-firming creams and just 15 minutes of exercise three times a week. In the spirit of I'll have what he's having, Karl passed me the remains of his chocolate pudding, a just-add-water protein supplement from his doctor that is a regimen staple (and clearly an acquired taste).



In a New York state of mind: Lagerfeld, photographed on June 6, 2006, two days before Apax announced the dissolution of his New York-based line. Hair: Jimmy Paul for Bumble and Bumble; makeup: Kabuki for Chanel; production: William Carducci for Urban NYC

continues on. "You have to be identified with a new generation physically and be a part of that. I'm like somebody from the moon. I'm nowhere."

The cosmetology of the new generation includes edgy menswear from Dior Homme, Libertine, Number (N)ine, and Undercover. "Other people are easy lays; I'm an easy fit," Karl says, a shake of some chain-link Chrome Hearts bracelets adding some haughty punctuation. Impaled on his fashionably frayed Mastermind necktie is a precious, 6000-year-old Egyptian-scarab sapphire. "If you don't fit in with the times, it means you're hated," he says. In Vegas, Celine Dion invited him to her show (though Karl quickly points out he's never bought any of her CDs). He wore his best silver-sequined Dior jacket, and a kindly usherette remarked she hadn't seen such an outfit since Elvis. (Karl

*fect*, an opportunist. I think in fashion one has to be. I want to be a part of everything and every group and every mood." For years, he'd been sequestered in the first-class lounges of Chanel and Fendi. "What I'd like to do with Lagerfeld is be all over the place," says Karl. "I like T-shirts. I like jeans. This is what I like best."

His one-shot collection for H&M in 2004 proved an inspiring lesson in populism. When news came that Stella McCartney's H&M experiment may not have sold as well, he blamed "prudish Swedes" for forcing Kate Moss out of the advertising after British tabloids ran pictures of her doing lines. Karl mentions that Dior has borrowed Moss from Chanel, and he is eagerly awaiting her return.

"Girls have wanted to look like Kate Moss since she was an emaciated 15-year-old," says Karl. "The whole thing at H&M was *senseless*. It was stupidity. Young people *like* that. The people they were supposed to sell to *love* the idea, eh?" Her fans wouldn't dare do as Kate Moss does anyway, says Karl: "Kate Moss has a lot of courage in the way she throws her life away in a very dangerous way, but that makes her so touching." And what of Kate's smack-happy ex, Pete Doherty? Karl published a book on the habitually smashed icon, by his friend Hedi Slimane. But now Karl has no time for the lad, finds the very memory of him irritating. "He's gone. His music—the look—is over now. There's nothing to think about. It is too late." *Bang!* Karl slaps the sofa. "Poor boy. You know, I had that look in the '60s and '70s." In other words, Jim Morrison had more originality in his left armpit.

In May, Karl launched Chanel's cruise collection for the first time ever in the States, at Grand Central Station; guardsmen in camouflage and bomb-sniffing dogs patrolled close by. Karl says there is a secret to his survival, and it is this: "Like the period you live in. If you like your own past better than the moment, that means you are *dépassé*. Then you are in trouble." Soon, you'd be over, like poor, pitiable Pete Doherty, already one of the walking dead in a porkpie hat. And—*bang!*—there would be nothing left to think about. ■

**"I maybe a cartoon, but I'm a cartoon on purpose. I have no ego at all. I laugh at myself," says Karl**

The lost poundage has afforded Karl a second youth, and he has vowed to stay this age—whatever that may be. "The best diet is, *in fact*, clothes. Never ever wear a bigger size," he says. His chin-obscuring geisha fan is history. "People don't smoke anymore. And in the past, they put the air-conditioning off so people would drink more, and it was unbearable," Karl says. The fan was a handy barrier, as are those safecracker gloves he wears if there's even the remotest threat of a handshake. Karl wears his X-Man sunglasses only when he goes abroad in the world; he takes them off in private to read or sketch.

"Very often, shortsighted people have a kind of sad eyes," he explains. Besides, the glasses are tinted, "so everybody looks 10 years younger!"

After his glorious metamorphosis, people—Europeans, chiefly—wondered if Karl was suddenly in love. "At the moment, it is not a subject," he says curtly. "This you can ask an 18-year-old." Crushes he calls "childish."

"You have to have a certain detachment that goes with your times," he

hoped she was referring to Early- and not Late-period peanut-butter-and-banana-sandwich-podgy Elvis.)

There are those who would speculate that Karl should be winding things down. Marc Jacobs has said he'd love to run Chanel, and the names of Phoebe Philo and Hedi Slimane have been murmured. "The thing is, I have a lifetime contract, so nobody can get the job until I decide to stop it," Karl says with obvious pleasure. He is obliged to continue for at least seven more years. "*At least!*" he barks. "Maybe in seven years, if I'm fed up...."

He apologizes for not being more of a mogul. "I am superficial, eh? Mind changing every five minutes, very open, and *in*

MODELS: MARTINA CORREA, MINA CVETKOVIC, CAROLINE FRANCISCHINI, OLYA IVANISEVIC, CECILIA MENDEZ, ANA MIHALOVIC, AMBER MILAM, HEIDI VERSTER, MELODY WOODIN, AND VALENTINA ZELYAIEVA