

MEL OTTENBERG

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apartamento - New York City



Mel Ottenberg is the proud owner of one of Manhattan's most iconic bedrooms. The all grey, late-70s-inspired sex den has wall-to-wall carpeting over a built-in queen bed located directly in the centre of the room. His closet doors are mirrored in a smoky glass and his ceiling is lacquered ivory. A bold statement, simple but intense. Experiencing it IRL holds bragging rights within a certain New York scene. Mel's known for other reasons too: a talented stylist and image maker, he has collaborated with the most influential celebrities, photographers, and fashion houses to create clever moments that have forever been stored in the visual hard drive of pop culture. Rihanna as Pope for the 2018 Met Gala? Classic Mel Ottenberg camp.

Mel and I met in college. Already at that time, he was obsessed with important style moments that transcend fashion. Over the years, he mentally archived those occasions and stored them away for future reference. Twenty years on, Mel has become an historian of the pop-cultural fashion spectacle, someone who can think deeply about the superficial. Mel's best work excites and seduces, yet also transgresses and empowers. In August 2021, he became the editor-in-chief of *Interview*, the celebrity-packed culture magazine founded by Andy Warhol in 1969, the perfect public playground for Mel to inject his high-octane style and humour into the zeitgeist at large. Mel has taken the same approach with his own apartment. To realise his fantasy interior, he collaborated with his friend, the late, great, cult designer Jim Walrod. The beloved downtown New York City personality was also a contributor and ally to *Apartamento*, appearing on the cover of issue #10, in 2012. Jim shared Mel's historian sensibilities. He was a wealth of eclectic design knowledge. He also possessed a rare ability to give his clients the confidence to take bold risks with their interiors, creating rooms that allowed them to grow into their true identities (such as Mel's bedroom). Jim's unexpected passing in 2017 was an enormous loss to all of us who were close to him and admired his work. Mel and I agreed, the 15-year-anniversary issue of *Apartamento* is a great occasion to celebrate Jim's legacy.



OK, so wait, what are we doing? What's our theme?

Two themes. One: Jim Walrod. Two: your New York history.

Great. This is my living room. Jim's the couch, the coffee table, the lights, the bowl, the table, and the totem. Oh, and that piece of art he gave me too. And this is the bedroom, which is so major because this is sort of the essence of Mel, but I would've never done this without Jim telling me I could. I didn't have the courage to think I could be this guy.

You needed a straight man to tell you how gay you could be?

Yes. I needed a straight man to be the reference.

I've always loved your bedroom. It's become urban folklore. I ran into someone on the street today who told me that your bedroom is inspired by 9 1/2 Weeks. It's not. Who told you that?

Awriter from LA. He told me everything about your apartment. Have I slept with this guy?

I don't know. Possibly.

The library's probably the least Jim, but it still has some major Jim stuff. This picture on the wall is one of the three tiny things that I got from Furniture Pimp, Jim's memorial auction at Wright auction house. Everything went for so much money, I didn't end up getting anything except this little doll that no one else wanted, but the second it arrived, I was like, 'Oh, fuck yeah. This little doll is major.' Sometimes when I'm making decisions about this apartment, I'm like, 'Jim doll, what do you say?' And the planners in here are from Jim. Jim vibes everywhere.

When did you meet Jim Walrod?

I discovered him in Apartmento. I was like, 'Who is this person living so casually with major design pieces?' It was early in the days of people telling their creative story through Instagram. He posted cool stuff that he had found. I remember this picture of a neon light that I just thought was the coolest, most hardcore, fiercest thing ever. I wanted it. We had many friends in common, but I had never met him. When I bought this place, I moved in with

my boyfriend at the time, Adam Selman. His style was so different from mine. So I thought, 'OK, I can't deal with tense bourgeois negotiations with my boyfriend about floor plans and sofas'. It just seemed so boring.

So you needed a design moderator?

I was like, 'Hey, moderator? Why don't we get rid of all our old stuff and get all new stuff?' So it was actually a collaboration between Adam, Jim, and myself. Adam chose the couch and the coffee table when we were out with Jim. Jim approved and convinced me it was the thing. I really wanted a designer to do this apartment so it would be a thing.

Was the style of your last apartment much different than this one?

Not really, this one is just more—

Amped up.

Yeah. Once, I had dinner at artist Charles Le Dray's house in Upstate New York. He lived in his childhood fantasy. His house was extreme '50s, and I thought, 'Hey, shit, my overall design fantasy is hardcore '70s, someday I want an extreme '70s house'. Not just because I like disco and cocaine aesthetics. It also reminds me of my parents—heavy glass and really clean lines, I really liked that. So I built a '70s set of sorts.

Seventies on the cusp of the '80s.

It has absolutely gone way more '80s. The Power Look at Home, by Prince Egon von Furstenberg, was published in 1980. That's been a major reference point for me, forever. I have lived here for about eight and a half years. So I must have hit Jim up on Instagram in the fall of 2013. We met at Cafe Gitane. He caught my energy and what I was talking about. He just saw me. He said my bedroom should be all grey carpet with a built-in bed and I was like, 'Wait, that's my all-time favorite reference from The Power Look at Home', and he was like, 'Yeah, let's do it!'

I'm going to read you this quote I found from Jim's memorial article in W magazine: 'As Jim often explained, his role was to perform a service: to help the people who hired him to refine their own taste into something they wanted to live with. At the end of an interior-design gig, he liked to say, if his clients wondered why they'd bothered to hire him in the



first place, he knew he'd been successful'. Exactly. What was cool about Jim is that he just said, 'You can have these outrageous things and you can live with them and it'll work'.

When you finished your bedroom, did it take you a period to ease into it? Or were you immediately like, 'Oh my god, this is exactly who I am'?

I eased into it. We put smoked mirror on the closet doors to give the room more space. And then we did the whole carpeted thing, which was perfect from the beginning. It was stressful because you think, 'Is this going to work? Is this going to fucking work?' But it

I got into it, I really got into it'. My mom's always like, 'You need art in there so it's not such a torture chamber sex bedroom', but I think that it would just look bad. What I like about my bedroom is that it has an extreme look, but it's also very comfortable. I'm definitely into normcore dressing because I think it's the only way I look good. But I'm not down for normcore interiors.

That's a nice balance. Your extreme side is a surprise you save for guests.

Something like that.

What's the last thing you bought?



worked. When we finished, the walls were still white. I was like, 'Hey, this still doesn't feel hardcore enough'. The space really became its own thing once the whole room was graphite-painted.

What happens when you bring a complete stranger home to that bedroom? It's an amazing experiment for one-night stands.

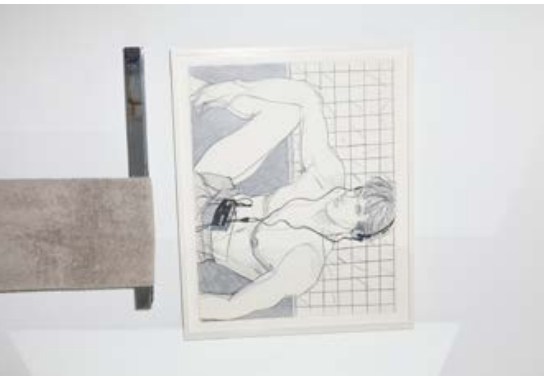
Sometimes there's no initial reaction, which I find amazing. Then later I'm told, 'Hey, I thought maybe you were a serial killer when I walked in, but that's OK'. This one guy recently told me, 'Hey, the first time I walked in there, I was a little concerned, but then when

A new couch. The couch and coffee table are on their way out. I love them but I don't party anymore. I used to have big parties. There was a lot of drinking, smoking, and god knows what else around that couch and coffee table. The couch and coffee table need late nights, they need to be drinking and smoking so much more with someone else. The couch wants what the couch wants and it wants to party. I'm going to find it the right party home. Cocaine has always been my aesthetic, even if I no longer do cocaine, but it's totally fine if that's what this place is still giving.

Even though you designed this place with

your partner at the time, it's very much a bachelor pad.

It really is. Well, I take that as a total compliment. Jim had the magic knowledge of which thing you're going to love forever. I'd ask, 'What am I supposed to put on this table?' He was always like, 'The only thing that you're supposed to put on this table is that Ettore Sottsass Murmansk fruit bowl'. Then I'd say, 'I can't afford it'. He's like, 'No, it's really just the thing. It's just what you're supposed to have', and I didn't do it. When Jim died and Adam and I broke up, I was like, 'Alright, I need that fucking Murmansk bowl'. So I found one.



involved with this. I'd be like, 'Fuck, he would really know what to do here'. I'm telling you, the doll, the Jim doll. He guides me.

Tell me about the amazing photograph of Badlands gay bar in your kitchen.

I've always loved this picture. I love the idea of all these gay guys. It's a Gary Lee Boas photograph from 1982. I just feel like here are all the cool people of New York City that we never got to meet because they were all gone too soon. It's a world we should have been a part of, but we never were.

Although, even if those elders weren't around



So it's a tribute?
Definitely a tribute. It needed to happen.

It started off as a work relationship, but it sounds like you became close.

We became friends, we always had a lot to talk about. He always had interesting takes on things, and they were always such a strange mix of obscure art or design movements from the previous century or some cool, up-and-coming designers working in Chinatown. He just seemed to know stuff that I was into. When I became the creative director of *Interview*, and then last year the editor-in-chief, I came into it thinking, 'Fuck, I just wish Jim could have been

to guide us, we definitely inherited their history.

True, we are them. By the time we moved to NYC, Badlands had become a sex shop.

What did you come to New York to be?

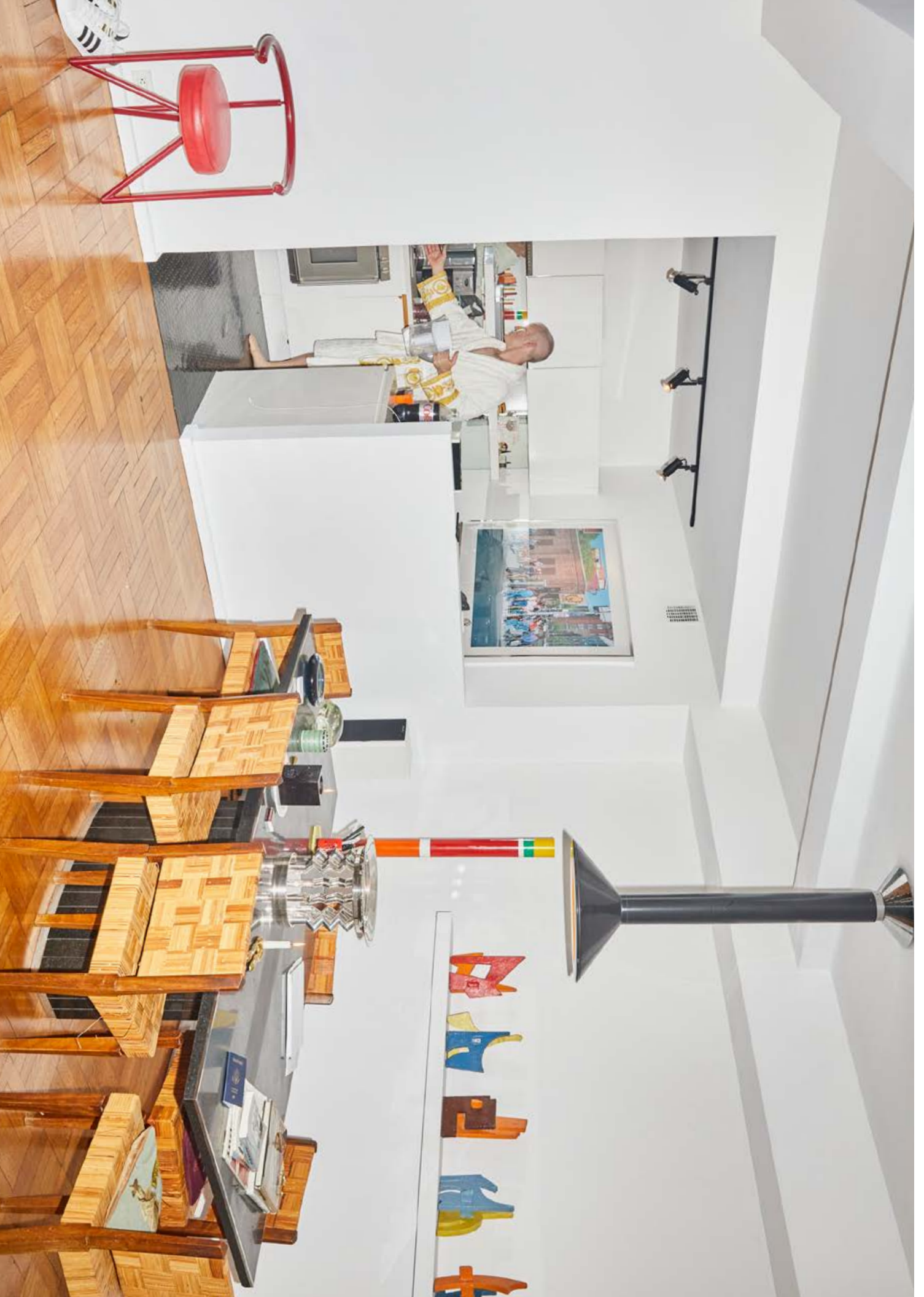
A fashion designer. I wanted to be like Marc Jacobs. That was my dream. I worked for a few different designers. My first job was at the design store Moss. I don't know why, I guess I just needed a job. I worked at Moss for six months during their peak.

Oh, wow.

I was a terrible cashier. Out all night, probably

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slept like 45 minutes, and then would go to work on Saturdays. That really crystallised my obsession with design. I never took that job seriously, but I was around all this amazing stuff, and I was around Murray Moss. That's going to rub off on you because he's so amazing. We were having so much fucking fun being bitchy and working there. It was incredible.

Has Murray Moss been here?

No.

This place would make him proud. I hope so. He's so cool! I would love to see him.

the art director of *Interview* in the '80s and he was like, 'Is any of it still relevant?' I'm like, 'Duh, it's so relevant. It's so fab!' So, hold on, Andy Warhol, Calvin Klein—who else is the end-all, be-all for me? I might have to get back to you on that one.

Two is good. I don't need three. Those two are hot. But yeah, after working for a few different brands, I was like, 'My goal shouldn't be working in the Marc Jacobs design office because I just don't think that that's what I'm good at. I'm more useful being a crazy, feral person in the universe, doing all these different things'. Also, it should



Who are your top three cultural heroes?
Calvin Klein.

In one sentence, why?

The provocative way in which he sold me on the whole fantasy is something I really value. Calvin Klein stuck his fucking Jewish name on underwear. Everyone hates Jews, by the way. People have been hating us for thousands of years. And that man took his fucking Jew name and put it all over everything. No one had ever done that before. So, Calvin Klein is the man. Also, Andy Warhol forever, a zillion percent. The coolest in so many ways. I recently took Marc Balest out to lunch. He was

be noted that you and I were in the same year at university and have known each other since we were 18.

It's true. It was actually BUTT magazine that brought us back together, years ago. I was working with them when you styled that radical photo editorial starring Arpad Minkles, shot by Terry Richardson. I was like, 'Oh, this is incredible, maybe it's time for me to check in with Mel again!'

I love that photo shoot. I'm so glad I did that. When that issue came out, every stylist I knew was like, 'Oh my god. You're never going to work again!'

Please tell me the story of that shoot.

Yes, of course I can tell it once and for all. So, we have to set the tone for the people reading this. Fifteen years ago, Arpád Miklós was this huge porn star. He lived in New York. He was the most handsome man. He was the most manly man.

He was the daddy of all daddies. I always thought he was better looking than most of Hollywood's leading men.

He really was the daddy of all daddies, just a cut above everybody. I just loved his films. His movies were super hot. He was sometimes at the club, but very rarely. He fucked every-



body in New York City, and everyone knew that he was an escort whose rate was \$350. I met him on Manhunt. Please note: I got him for free. Isn't that romantic? We had sex in my apartment. And I said, 'Oh my god, you need to be shot for BUTT magazine, and Terry Richardson has to do the photo shoot'. Then Terry came over, and I had all these clothes. I'm sure I had Bernhard Wilhelm and those kinds of things that I would want to have in 2008. And then he was like, 'I'm not down to wear any of this'. But he was down to wear that amazing silver Jeremy Scott construction worker hard hat. Terry took all these very sexy pictures of him and then I blew him.

The image BUTT ran of you and Arpád together, you only see the back of your head. But we all knew it was you. I have a distinctive head.

And that's why fashion industry people thought you were crazy?

Yes. And I was like, 'So what? It's great. I'm going to love that picture'. I wish I had a print of that picture. Thank god, it wasn't the cover. Even though it would've been a great cover. Actually, it was BUTT that gave me my first cover.

Oh, which one? I'll show it to you. I know exactly where it is,



because my bookshelf is organised so that I know where all my fucking shit is. This one. Autumn 2002. See: 'International Faggot Magazine for Interesting Homosexuals and the Men Who Love Them' was the subtitle of my first magazine cover. Were you already working there at this time?

I was. That's why this interview makes so much sense, we have been intertwined through magazines our whole post-college lives. Literally.

What would you think the 25-year-old Mel would think of the 45-year-old Mel?

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I think the 25-year-old Mel would be down for the 45-year-old Mel. The 25-year-old Mel would be excited about *Interview* and I think I'd definitely be into this apartment. I'm sure I would be surprised that 45 is not the end of the world because I'm sure that's what I thought when I was 25.

Since you have taken over *Interview*, what have you brought to it that you think wasn't there before?

I want to invite people to play in our sandbox in a way that is more experimental, and I want to inspire people to say something that's not just like a press release. Trying to seduce people into having more interesting conversations is fun.

Who was it that you just got to admit that they were arrested for urinating?

Oh, Tiffany Pollard. That was so funny, I love doing interviews.

Do you remember the first issue of *Interview* that you ever saw?

I remember it exactly. It was after Warhol died in 1987. I was at a salon. I was 11. My mom's hair stylist was cutting my hair. I'm looking at this *Interview* magazine. Brian Bosworth is the cover star. The stylist says, 'Oh, *Interview*'s trash. It's pornography. It's disgusting. It's over, it's dead. Andy's dead. It's just garbage. You shouldn't look at it.' I remember thinking, 'I don't know. It seems kind of cool to me.' It doesn't have to be for everyone. I want people to hate on it. Our next cover is coming out featuring Kim Kardashian. I'm sure a lot of people will hate it, that's great. Stuff that is made for everyone is just really not for me.

I appreciate that.

I never thought I'd be part of a thing in America. Until *Interview*, I never was really a part of anything in America. I never really did anything big with American entities. Like, Rihanna isn't American; I worked with her for a really long time. The first magazines I worked with, none of them were American. New York has been my home for almost 25 years, but I never really had a thing here, you know what I mean?

Do people approach you differently now because you're editor-in-chief of *Interview*? It's the most official title you have held.

I've had a long enough career to know when you really feel the momentum, when things are popping and people are really into what you're doing and also when they're just not. I feel like because you've restored the incredible legacy of *Interview*, you kind of represent New York City.

If that's the case, then that's really amazing, and I'm so proud of that. I really am.

Interview has had a long history of inspiring people to move to New York City. Its raw glamour and sense of freedom and excitement created a longing that made us feel like we needed to be a part of everything that was happening here. How do you make New York City feel magical for the next generation?

I guess by being curious and having fun. I feel like if you're having fun, that's going to attract the right people.

What do you envision doing when you're done with this life in fashion and editorial?

Oh my god, I don't know. I will say, since this is *Apartmento*, that I'd be super down to live in this apartment until I died. If I lived here forever, that would be my American dream.

