



PHOTOGRAPHED BY
RAINER HOSCH

She's the New York
doll who put the
attitude into A-list and
the cash into couture.

Jeffrey Podolsky
meets the inimitable
Nan Kempner

SOCIALITE FANTASTIC

Nan Kempner, New York's most international socialite, paid her customary visit to London at the height of the season last June before heading off to Paris for the July couture shows. Kempner's annual globetrotting social calendar is well entrenched: autumn and late spring at her 16-room Park Avenue apartment in New York for the fashion shows and the charity-ball circuit, with weekends at the family estate on 80 horsey acres outside Manhattan; Thanksgiving and Easter at the cottage in Lyford Cay; Christmas and New Year at Oscar and Annette de la Renta's plantation house in Santo Domingo. In January, it's back to Paris for the spring/summer couture shows and her annual rendezvous with the gang at Gstaad. There are midsummer junkets to friends' villas in Provence and oceanfront estates in the Hamptons, before passing through Paris for final fittings from the

Belle of the ball at the 1983 Met YSL show



EVEN WHEN YOU'RE SICK, YOU SHOULD LOOK GOOD



With Christian Lacroix, 1999



With Victoria de Rothschild and Duchess de Cadaval, 2000



With Catherine Deneuve at a YSL couture show in Paris, 2001. Above, with Hamish Bowles, 1995



With Malcolm Forbes and Mikhail Baryshnikov, 1987

spring collection, followed by the traditional three-week September get-together with her husband, financier Tommy Kempner, in their usual apartment at the Cipriani in Venice.

But at Royal Ascot last summer Kempner's social agenda collapsed. Instead of being nestled in her 'reserved' room at Mark Birley's flat in South Kensington – where, Birley grouches, it takes three men to carry in her Louis Vuitton bags – she spent three weeks in the Royal Brompton Hospital. Kempner has severe emphysema, and lay gasping for breath with double pneumonia.

Long before emphysema triggered her first frightening bout of pneumonia in Gstaad six years ago, the salty yet easily hurt super-socialite suffered from what her pal Andy Warhol once kiddingly diagnosed as 'social disease'. On any given day, she will hop aboard a plane to attend the best dinner party in London, Paris or Venice – or skip off to Eugenie Livanos's wedding in England before rejoining the de Kwiatkowskis, Balfours and Adam Czartoryski on a trek through Poland.

Close friends, including Vicomtesse Jacqueline de Ribes and Countess Isabelle d'Ornano (vice chairman of the Sisley cosmetics company), insist that her aching need to be surrounded by others – she dreads being alone – is neither frivolous nor superficial. While she was in hospital, Kempner was truly sick about missing

the wedding of Anne Summers's son, Alexander, and Barbara and Conrad Black's annual garden party. And, recalls Anne Summers, 'it killed her' to forgo the Bamfords' 21st-birthday party for their son George, not to mention her planned stay at Hélène and Michel David-Weill's home in Provence.

The renowned party-giver loves nothing more than to entertain and quickly turned her hospital stay into an intimate soirée. 'It was like a cocktail party,' recalls Summers, who, together with Robin Hambro, Serena Balfour, Sally Metcalfe, Countess Antoinette Guerrini-Maraldi and Beatrice Santo Domingo, called upon her in hospital. The abundance of flowers from her favourite London shop, Pulbrook & Gould, rivalled the Chelsea Flower Show. 'They were mainlining me with antibiotics – I was like a human pin cushion,' says Kempner in a throaty voice slowly cured like a fine prosciutto from smoking Parliaments, which she took up at the age of 12 to stunt her growth. Given her whippet-thin, five-foot nine stature, the ploy obviously didn't work.

The spunky 72-year-old bon viveur was less concerned about her health than about





Exchanging a word with Kelly Klein at Princess Yasmin Aga Khan's birthday party, 1990

**I LOVE TO
BREAK
THE RULES.
IF YOU'RE
TOO NICE,
YOU'RE
BORING**

her appearance. 'Even when you're sick, you've got to look good,' declares Kempner, who won't step outside to post a letter unless she cuts a fashionable swathe. Kempner deemed that the white hospital robe was inexcusably unbecoming against her ashen skin, so Summers brought her a light-blue nightgown lavished with lace from the Monogrammed Linen Shop. 'Nan hated it,' says Summers. 'She didn't think it was sexy enough.' Kempner settled instead on a pink bathrobe from the Midnight Shop. She also dispatched a *New York Times* reporter to Turnbull & Asser for some men's silk pyjamas, while Summers assembled a team of stylists from REAL Hairdressing to tidy her up ('If I put on too much make-up, I look like a man in drag,' she says) and Birley regaled her with packages of food.

But Kempner's most conspicuous absence by far was her empty ringside seat at the July couture shows in Paris. Since her first visit in 1962, she has missed only two. She usually spends around \$70,000 on perhaps six discounted pieces from Yves Saint Laurent (she owns the world's largest private collection), Balmain, Ungaro, Valentino, Galliano and Gaultier. 'She is an icon,' says fashion arbiter Eleanor Lambert. Despite her willowy frame, Kempner – with her chiselled features, emerald-green eyes, strong,

swift stride and once-blonde mane – was always more stallion than swan. She never possessed the femininity, intrigue or all-American beauty of Babe Paley, Gloria Guinness or CZ Guest, but as Yves Saint Laurent's fashion ambassador to the US she defined her own distinctly American look: a relaxed, modern elegance with attitude, using the artistic simplicity of his couture to portray the spirit of American sportswear. Kempner's rangy, androgynous silhouette – leggy, long-waisted, flat-hipped – was the perfect vehicle for Yves Saint Laurent's groundbreaking tuxedos, masculine pantsuits and pleated pants, which she often wore with the soft drapery of his exuberant Seventies silk shirts or beaded sweaters.

Kempner – a bargain hunter who wears the same size six that she wore 50 years ago so she can purchase catwalk samples and save a few bob – has a radar eye for selecting and mixing couture separates, which she culls from the thousands of coats, dresses, skirts and trousers that have invaded her three grown-up children's bedrooms. The whim of the moment may dictate a Gap T-shirt with 30-year-old Levi's, sumptuously paired with a \$40,000 Galliano white leather jacket and bold David Webb gold cuffs or JAR earrings. Or she may opt for a slightly imperfect, *sui generis* twist: a knotted blouse,

a cascading scarf, a coat slung casually over her shoulders, a Philip Treacy fake leopardskin hat with feline ears. Whatever piece Kempner selects, she animates it so completely that it becomes an expression of her personality. 'Style is having your own personal stamp,' she says. 'It has its own signature.'

As does her maverick personality. A racy California girl, Kempner retains the sultry earthiness of a Chanderlesque Lauren Bacall. Like it or loathe it, she says whatever trips off her tongue. 'I really love to break rules,' trumpets Kempner, perched in her Gabhan O'Keeffe crimson-and-saffron-stencilled library among paintings by Picasso and Magritte, a David Hockney sketch in memory of her dog-napped Wheaten terrier, Cash, Tang dynasty figures, and an original Jean-Michel Frank bronze lamp. 'If you're too nice, you're a bore. You've got to be a little bit provocative to be amusing.'

'She can say the worst thing to me, like "How did you pull yourself into those pants? Are you wearing a corset?"' remarks Oscar de la Renta's executive-at-large Boaz Mazon, 'but from her it's charming, because she says even worse things about herself.' The self-effacing Kempner delights in characterising herself as a 'stick figure'. When Tom Wolfe told her that she was not,

in fact, the inspiration for his great invention, the 'social X-rays', rather than being relieved, she considered it 'an even worse put-down'. 'She's beyond thin – she's a minus,' observes a close friend of the seven-stone food enthusiast, who claims to eat like a Hoover and recently published *R.S.V.P.*, an appetising, voyeuristic cookbook of her famous girlfriends' recipes (the royalties go to Kempner's favourite cancer charity, Memorial Sloan-Kettering Hospital).

She savours a hearty bullshot or vodka gimlet, sleeps in 'the emperor's clothes' and answers her own phone. She was *the* uptown society disco queen, partying at Studio 54 in her Dior hotpants with a Quaalude-poppin' Halston, trading insults with 'that awful little man' Truman Capote, and swaying lustily with Maxime de la Falaise, black muscle boys, 'cats, dogs, midgets, you name it – as long as they danced'.

Kempner was the first surgically ageless prominent socialite to overhaul her face *and* admit it. She had her once droopy eyelids restored 30 years ago and, 13 years later, underwent a facelift so major that her bellybutton, 'is now where my chin is. Women say to me, "Oh, I really must do my face," and you can see the scars behind their ears,' she scoffs. She acknowledges that she sticks her foot 'in my big mouth nonstop, and I always get caught'. But she remained ladylike mum during her husband's rather public, eight-year affair with another woman.

'Oh, come on, every man has affairs,' she says dismissively. (As for her own gadding about, Kempner purrs coyly: 'I am the Virgin Mary and I wouldn't dream of admitting to being anything else.')

The daughter of a rich San Francisco car dealer, Kempner was born and bred in couture. Her grandmother imported a Parisian dressmaker to design her childhood dresses and, as a teenager, she accompanied her mother to Paris, where she forged close friendships with the young and then unknown designers Emanuel Ungaro, André Courrèges, Karl Lagerfeld, Valentino and, later, Yves Saint Laurent. It was Saint Laurent who, as an apprentice at Dior, pitied a tearful Kempner when her mother refused to buy her a sleeveless white sheath dress and matching



In sparkling form, 1997



At a tennis tournament in London, 1997



Radiant in red, 1986



At a Tom Ford for Gucci party, 1999



With husband Tommy, 2000

Nan with Valentino and friends, Paris, 2001

overcoat with ermine cuffs – and made the vendeuse reduce the price.

An only child, Kempner mastered the gift of the gab in order to ease her loneliness. 'In the end, I enjoyed that I didn't have to share anything, particularly my inheritance,' she says only half-jokingly. She headed east to university and marriage to Thomas Kempner, a descendant of one of New York's greatest Jewish banking families. They have lived in their current, decidedly un-Park Avenue, chintz-free, two-storey apartment for 45 years now. Assisted by Bernardo and Sylvia Barroso, her household manager and cook of 42 years (a record tenure by Upper East Side standards), Kempner furthered her reputation as a style savant: she regularly hosted a paella of blue bloods, couturiers, interior designers and journalists at intimate lunch parties featuring her favourite dish, *pets-de-nonne* (literally 'nun's farts' – fritters made with choux pastry), or at her famous Sunday-night spaghetti carbonara buffets for 200. She has entertained Viscount and Viscountess Linley, Barry Humphries and Princess Michael of Kent (who, a guest recalls, rankled Tommy by rebuking him for addressing her as 'Christina' rather than 'ma'am'). At a lunch-on-your-lap for a prominent British author not so long ago, one guest, to his horror, heard his food-crammed pudding plate crack. 'Please don't worry, sir,' said the butler. 'It is only the 18th-century service.'

Kempner luxuriates in the kind of sybaritic splendour shared by only a handful of New York's elite – Mercedes Bass, Marie-Josée Kravis, Brooke Astor. She wakes up late in the morning after a minimum of eight hours' sleep and buzzes for Sylvia, who greets her with the day's mail and newspapers and with breakfast arranged neatly on a white bed tray



At a fashion benefit show, New York, 1968

covered with monogrammed Porthault linen. During breakfast she works the phone ('my bed is my office') with friends Pat Buckley and Countess Sheila de Rochambeau, before meeting her yoga instructor in the gym down the hall. Her clothes having been laid out the night before, she then dresses for lunch at her local boîte, Swifty's. Next on the agenda are a few errands, such as a visit to Christie's, for whom she is an international representative, before she heads home to review upcoming travel plans, the day's correspondence and invitations with her personal assistant, Donzie (the daughter of

Sylvina and Bernardo). She will instruct the housekeeper, Fatima, on which evening clothes require pressing, have a massage, settle into a bubble bath, take a nap, and change for the evening (or if – God forbid! – it's to be a night at home, into, say, luxurious evening pyjamas or a kaftan). Her nocturnal escorts will most likely be such *amitiés amoureuses* as jeweller Kenny Jay Lane, Boaz Mazor, Prince Ameen Aga Khan or Christie's honcho Pedro Girao. (The society whirl 'bores the shit out of Tommy', who prefers the company of a good history book.)

When I meet her after a Madison Avenue lunch with close confidante Annette de la Renta, she is wearing a 15-year-old YSL white linen shirt, beat-up beaded turquoise moccasins and a new off-white, whipcord cotton Tom Ford for Yves Saint Laurent pencil skirt. She archly observes that 'when you want to go to the loo you have to take the whole goddamn skirt down. I mean, there's no way you can bring it up over your behind.' She was once known for walking everywhere but now occasionally relies on her husband's crusty driver, Larry, to ferry her around town. 'I'm just not breathing the way I used to,' says Kempner. Last January she literally stopped breathing, in Gstaad, and almost underwent a tracheotomy, after which she quit smoking. 'It scared the shit out of me,' admits Kempner, who, miffed

that she wouldn't make Sir Jocelyn Stevens's 70th birthday bash at the Eagle Club, refused to board a chopper that was waiting to whisk her to hospital in Bern: 'I was *not* going to die in Bern. If I die in Gstaad, it's a happening.'

The Kempners' 50th anniversary ball last May was a happening, all right, the sort that rarely occurs in New York any more. About 500 of her closest friends – including Dame

Vivien Duffield and Sir Jocelyn Stevens, Pierre Bergé, Pauline Karpidas, Marguerite Littman and Michael Goedhuis – flew in with a premonition. 'I thought she was going to die at that party,' says Birley with his trademark dryness. Kempner, never prone to self-pity, says she still has at least 10 good years. 'Besides, if I knew otherwise, poor Tommy would be broke. I'd be out there spending a million dollars a day.'

Given the march of time, instead of her globetrotting Kempner will have the leisure to be with her 'adorable egghead' of a husband and their six grandchildren. She may relinquish her regular appearances at the Paris couture shows, but has no intention of making herself scarce at such playpens as Venice or Gstaad (she flies hooked up to her own oxygen). 'If she goes crazy, she'll die in six months,' confides a close London friend, echoing the catty rumours that ladies lunch on. 'If she's sensible, she'll live a few more years.' Others know that her remarkable resilience is the fabric that forever keeps her going: 'Even if she realises the seriousness of her illness, she's still going to put herself in danger,' says Texan couture queen Lynn Wyatt. 'That's her character.'

'I've created a lot of attention for doing absolutely nothing,' jokes Kempner, who once worked at *Harper's Bazaar*. Although she has chaired numerous charities, she concedes that she is no philanthropist. Yet her intimate understanding of couture and its relation to lifestyle and history isn't mere vanity. It is a philosophy – and her lasting gift to the fashion firmament. As the American woman most photographed in Saint Laurent's revolutionary pantsuits or see-through blouses, it was she who helped him emancipate the modern American woman's wardrobe. Museums around the world covet her priceless couture collection and embrace her as a patron of the arts. But the art that Kempner will always relish is the art of fine living. 'Nothing's going to keep me down,' she says, heedless of her own mortality. 'I don't want to be pushed down Park Avenue in a bath chair. Hell, I'm going out with a bang, not a whimper.' □