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Intervista con Giulia Niccolai:
I think I'm becoming Japanese

LUISA DEL GIUDICE, PASQUALE VERDICCHIO
WITH PAUL VANGELISTI

Giulia Niccolai was born in Milan in 1934. She has worked as a photojournalist, her work appearing internationally in magazines such as *Life*, *Paris Match* and *Der Spiegel*. In 1966 she published a novel, *Il grande angolo* (Feltrinelli, Milano). Her other publications include: *Humpty Dumpty* (concrete poetry; Torino: Geiger, 1969), *Greenwich* (nonsense geographies, Geiger, 1971), *Poema e Oggetto* (visual poetry; Geiger, 1974), *Russky Salad Ballads & Webster Poems* (Geiger, 1977), *Harry's Bar e Altre poesie*, 1969–1980 (Feltrinelli, 1981), *Singsong for New Year's Adam and Eve* (Mulino di Bazzano: Tam Tam, 1982), and *Frisbees in Facolta'* (Bergamo: Edizioni El Bagatt, 1984). She has also worked extensively as a translator from English, her most noteworthy publication being her version of Gertrude Stein's *Geographical History of America*. Niccolai has one book in English, *Substitutions*, from the Red Hill Press (1975), with a collection of her recent work forthcoming from the same press in 1986. In recent years Niccolai has gained international recognition for her sound-poetry and performances. During her recent visit to the U.S., she performed in New York, San Francisco and Los Angeles.

The following interview was conducted in both English and Italian, in order to allow Niccolai maximum freedom of expression. We

therefore chose to conserve interlingual fluctuations throughout the transcript to more accurately convey the texture of the author's "language."

DEL GIUDICE: Your bilingualism is so integrated, functional, why do you choose to be translated?

NICCOLAI: Actually, I have done many translations from English into Italian. To work as a translator is a very humble job that helps you in your own work but, as far as the result is concerned, I do not believe in translations. I write my poetry in such a way that it cannot be translated. I do that on purpose.

DEL GIUDICE: Yet translations of your poetry exist.

NICCOLAI: Yes, Paul Vangelisti has done most of them. He's done a translation of *Substitution*, which are some of the first poems I wrote, in which I don't say a thing of my own. As, for instance, in the *Greenwich* poems which are all made up of words taken from an atlas. A couple of years after this book was published, I looked through it and saw it in a way I had never seen it before. I realized that, at a certain moment, I got the desire to write poetry, but evidently I was either too scared or not ready to say anything, so I chose to do the *Greenwich* poems and *Substitution*. As I go on in *Greenwich*, I say more. I become more and more verbal and make statements. It took from '69 to '80, as I looked for my own style, my own form. Only when you find your form can you say nearly anything and it doesn't embarrass you to do it. The more you find your own form, the more things you can say.

DEL GIUDICE: . . . and the less you can be translated.

NICCOLAI: Yes.

DEL GIUDICE: Paul Vangelisti has noted that your recent work is approximately 80% in English. Does this indicate a transitory phase or a gravitation toward a more permanent one?

NICCOLAI: What Paul is talking about is the book *Singsong for New Year's Adam and Eve*, which also appeared in *Invisible City*¹ and it

is definitely 85% in English. The poems I am doing, and started doing soon after these, are called *Frisbees*—like the disc that one throws. Those instead are 90% in Italian. There is a reason I did *Singsong* in English: it is a love poem for a person whose mother tongue is English, even though he has lived in Italy for 25 years and has a Maltese passport! Then I said: “No my dear, you live in Italy. You can’t tagliarti le gambe so much che you only write in English, so bang, the *Frisbees* are nearly all in Italian.

DEL GIUDICE: Again, about this English/Italian polarization. How do you define the parameters of your English poetry as opposed to your Italian poetry? What dictates the language in which you write?

NICCOLAI: Let’s put it this way: the poem, “Two Jewels” is dedicated to Jules Grossman, an American. Evidently, I was thinking it in English; it is full of puns. In other situations, as in the more recent *Frisbees*, it is the fact of being there and listening to words, realizing or even talking them. I speak with somebody and I become aware that even a very simple phrase, five words, can have three different meanings. Inside myself I am always playing with words; it is an exercise I do automatically. In knowing two languages there is schizophrenia, but there is also the fact that one language enhances the possibility of the other one. For instance, Nabokov was a fantastic punster because he knew all the other languages and so was always bridging them, seeing in them more possibilities. For instance, in one “Frisbee,” I wrote: “Even writing lies on the page.” It can mean four different things: it can mean writing “lies down,” or “tells a lie,” and there is “even” as opposed to “uneven.”

VERDICCHIO: Lei ha definito il Suo linguaggio come “chartered.” Vorrei sapere se é più applicabile alle prime poesie dove diceva che cercava una “voce.”

NICCOLAI: Certo, definitely, tant’è vero che, é per i *Greenwich* che ho detto questo, e dove io assolutamente non dico niente. Semplicemente, seguendo la sintassi di una lingua; io metto assieme gli articoli e le preposizioni e si crea un ritmo e anche un concetto che é aperto, ognuno lo interpreta come vuole.

VERDICCHIO: Questo lega bene con la prossima domanda che è una citazione dal libro di Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale*, dove, parlando del poema-oggetto, dice che "l'oggetto non è più oggetto ma non è ancora poema, e del resto nessuno sa se riuscirà a diventarlo."² È questa osservazione applicabile anche al linguaggio convenzionale?

NICCOLAI: Certo. Ognuno di noi, come vede le cose, le fa diventare poesia. Non si può pretendere questo dagli altri, cioè, io credo moltissimo che è un awareness che ognuno di noi deve coltivare.

VERDICCHIO: Allora, parlando del pubblico, la sua poesia *diventa* poesia se il pubblico riesce a percepire un certo significato?

NICCOLAI: Esatto, per questo li chiamo *Frisbees*, they have to throw them back to me otherwise it doesn't work.

VERDICCHIO: Questo ritorna forse sulla strada di prima. Vorrei sapere se l'uso dell'inglese come lingua straniera di maggior presenza, è legato ad una poetica che ha basi nell'inglese?

NICCOLAI: È legato al fatto, prima di tutto, che mia madre era americana e mi ha sempre parlato in inglese. Tutti gli altri attorno a me parlavano in italiano, allora io ho cominciato parlando in italiano, ma all'età di 6 anni ho cominciato a risponderle in inglese. Lì, evidentemente, io ho dovuto aspettare finché my subconscious had the feeling that it knew the difference between "horse" and "cigarette." I had to hear it many times before I knew it. One day, when we were in a tram in Milan, my mother was very tall and I was only 6, I started talking to her in English.

DEL GIUDICE: Did you shock yourself?

NICCOLAI: No, I shocked her, because that was the beginning of the war and actually it was very dangerous to speak English, so immediately we descended the tram and that was the end of that.

VERDICCHIO: Poor timing!

NICCOLAI: Maybe I did it on purpose! So, that is the first reason. Also, there were very few children's books in Italian then. I was born in '34, so I was talking about the beginning of the 40s. My mother

instead would often come to the States, so all my children's books were in English. Obviously, I was also given those children's books so I would learn English. So, all the nursery rhymes and all the sort of magic, which is Anglo-Saxon, came to me in that way.

DEL GIUDICE: Franco Tagliafierro speaks of your nonsense poetry in terms of Lewis Carroll,³ whom you yourself have translated. Do you think this is accurate?

NICCOLAI: Well, I have an incredible love and fondness for Lewis Carroll, and I would be very happy if it were accurate! For instance in . . .

DEL GIUDICE: "Jabberwocky"

NICCOLAI: Exactly. I know perfectly well that, when I did the first "Greenwich" ("A marmolato omst wartburg the placid lakes"), I had the "Jabberwocky" in mind and also all of Carroll's puns.

DEL GIUDICE: What other "children's" writers have made an impression on you? And are they still with you?

NICCOLAI: Well, way back when . . . I'd say the nursery rhymes were absolutely . . .

DEL GIUDICE: . . . the traditional English nursery rhymes?

NICCOLAI: Yes, like "Ride a horse to Banbury cross to see a fine lady . . ." There is something there that I haven't quite understood, but I think it is still a very magical language. It still transmits something very very strong.

DEL GIUDICE: The language itself?

NICCOLAI: Incantations, *sai*, *proprio*, formulas, magical formulas. When I was about sixteen and very mixed up, I started diving into art, which I could not, obviously, understand, but I felt that there was something very healing in art for me. I am convinced that great artists are translators of something that is very magical and sacred. Even though you are not immediately aware of it, and it takes you a lifetime to work it out, you have a perception and this is why you

become an artist yourself. I very much have a feeling that I write also as a, how shall I say?

DEL GIUDICE: A medium?

NICCOLAI: Un esercizio spirituale.

DEL GIUDICE: So you are the poet as spiritual medium?

NICCOLAI: Yes. I am a medium. I am a pilgrim and a medium.

VERDICCHIO: Ezra Pound diceva che intendere un linguaggio non ha nessuna importanza per capire almeno una parte di una poesia, basta il suono del linguaggio per trasmettere la buona parte di un significato. È questo un aspetto della Sua poesia?

NICCOLAI: Ma Ezra Pound é senz'altro un grande mago. Lì, dà un'indicazione anche del modo in cui si devono sentire le cose.

VERDICCHIO: Anche lì allora c'è la stregoneria della poesia.

NICCOLAI: Eh sì. È il fatto che lui vede un ideogramma e riesce a decifrarlo. Ma in realtà everything is always there, it's just that we can't see things anymore.

DEL GIUDICE: Recurring in your poetry is the word "incest." What does it mean to you?

NICCOLAI: Ah yes, it is in Emilio Villa's ballad⁴ and also in one of the first ones from *Dai Novissimi*.⁵ This is a very difficult question which can be answered in more ways than one. I say it in Emilio Villa's ballad, a person I consider sort of sacred. I call him "E.V.", "evening" and the "everest" (as the mountain); sort of sacred. I

NICCOLAI: Ah yes, it is in Emilio Villa's ballad⁴ and also in one of the first ones from *Dai Novissimi*.⁵ This is a very difficult question which can be answered in more ways than one. I say it in Emilio Villa's ballad, a person I consider sort of sacred. I call him "E.V.", "evening" and the "everest" (as the mountain); he is also one who is most "ev"—as in good, better, best. I call him "Zeus Rabelais," which is no little thing. Here, "incest" is directed to the fact that he made a poem on a computer and he doesn't know English, but

this poem mimes English to perfection and everybody can understand it. I read it in Sydney, Australia, where Spatola and I had been invited for a convention on Italianistics. I was reading Italian poetry of the last 10 years and whenever I read this one of Emilio's, everybody clapped their hands. There, you see, it's tied up to Pound again. They could not understand what I was saying but they felt the strength in it. He mimes English in this poem and what he does with the computer and with the language is incest. I call it "incest" because it's more than just making love, it's prohibited because it's magic.

DEL GIUDICE: Incest therefore is a metaphor for poetry-making?

NICCOLAI: Yes, and of being a poet: being incestuous with words and with objects and with people, that is, making love to these things and entering them. Naturally it's "incest" with quotation marks around it, no? It has that connotation, and "incidere" too. If I say "making love," it's too flat, so I use a knife.

DEL GIUDICE: Do you feel any more actively or passively involved in the feminist cause than you did when you were last in Los Angeles in 1978? Then you said that you were not *actively* involved.

NICCOLAI: Yes, I hadn't been actively involved then because I was living with Spatola in the country for ten years and all the feminist movement of that period was a city movement. I am not active in it now, but I do feel the good things that it has brought about, in this country, much more than in Italy, where men aren't even aware of the fact that they are so chauvinistic.

DEL GIUDICE: Are you passively involved? Do you feel you've made a contribution to feminism?

NICCOLAI: Ah . . . I would say so, yes.

DEL GIUDICE: How?

NICCOLAI: For the way I am.

DEL GIUDICE: As a role model then?

NICCOLAI: No, I wouldn't call it a role model, but here one should also speak about the "chiosse letterarie," about power. I'm working for the poet's union, per il sindacato dei poeti, e come io mi comporto e reagisco al potere, in tutti gli anni in cui ho scritto, diventa un'apertura, non un simbolo. I don't want to be a symbol, a role, but I show that things can be opened if you have the patience and if you stand on your two feet.

DEL GIUDICE: Qual'è stata la tua strategia verso la politica, d'ignorarla?

NICCOLAI: No, no, because you have to be aware of all the games and all the sicknesses and of how people go sour because of bitterness and you say: "No, I don't want that to happen to me." But you can't do it only with will power; you have to understand why people are so ill, and then start having a sort of compassion. But it's all very tricky; it's stuff one can hardly talk about, because it can be so easily misunderstood—only if the other person has had the same sort of interior experience can they understand.

DEL GIUDICE: How has feminism evolved in Italy in the past five years; has it expanded classwise; has there been a return to more traditional values?

NICCOLAI: These things are very much related to the economic situation of a country and there is a terrible riflusso at the moment. If it had, in the 70s, opened up to different classes, now people are closing up again, and I am afraid that that is what is happening in Italy.

DEL GIUDICE: Do you have any observations on the political climate in America?

NICCOLAI: I have this enormous love for America which also comes from my mother, and the fact that I've been here many times. When I was in New York, I had the feeling that one third of the city was selling, one third was buying, and the other one third was doing manual labour of the soul, to keep the city from exploding. I haven't seen this in L.A. because I haven't walked. I've seen it a lot in San Francisco. These people that walk around all day: look at each other, bow in acknowledgement, and then go on—pilgrims. It is as though

with their presence they are trying to keep the world from going crazy. In Cazadero, in the Napa Valley, though, you see these 'beautiful' people who are already there: si stanno esercitando al fatto che é caduta la bomba, loro sono i pochi rimasti vivi e allora vogliono trasmettere più informazione possibile buona del passato, ma sono come degli eremiti e degli esteti meravigliosi, ma . . . c'è il re vikingo, c'è buddha, c'è la strega, capisci: these are all people I met in three days in Cazadero.

DEL GIUDICE: Simona Weller, as you pointed out, stated: "The real avantgarde in art is being lived by women artists, inasmuch as they are *a priori* excluded by the system, automatically they produce a real free art."⁶ Do you think that is true today, or less true than ever?

NICCOLAI: Many women writers and artists have not been considered while alive. I went to a museum in Ravenna and saw two paintings by two women del 1700; so I said: "Oh, for heaven's sake, when did these appear?" I asked one of the guards and he told me: "Ah, sì, sì, they've just been pulled out from the cellar." E poi, una scrittrice come Gertrude Stein a me ha insegnato moltissimo, e nessuno la legge, because she's too tough. Only writers read Gertrude Stein, even critics don't read her, even though they talk about her. They read other critical books on her, but they haven't read her. It's time that these people were pulled out. For instance, I met Katleen Fraser, who does this magazine called *However*, on avantgarde women's writing, which is a marvelous choice. At this point, she's pulling out Laura Riding, while another friend of mine who happened to come to Italy brought me Laura Riding's book. And I said: "My dear, this is incredible!" Imagine, I had never heard about Laura Riding. All this has to be done. About Simona Weller's statement, I cannot tell you because I'm incapable of judging.

DEL GIUDICE: There are a few experimental women poets, therefore, but even fewer readers of such poetry. What new strategies do you see for the feminist poet, or is she condemned to isolation?

NICCOLAI: In Italy, in these past seven or eight years, there have been a lot of readings. Even small provincial towns are now organizing these readings and absolutely lovely things happen at times. So

there is this opening. But then again, what you find is that the same people are always invited to these readings, the organizers don't open up to new poets—male or female—who are good. As in poetry you make so little money there isn't much of a difference between male and female. You become either an operator yourself, and you get yourself published, or you write criticism in a magazine, allora hai un'arma di ricatto. But both men and women do that.

DEL GIUDICE: So you're saying: because poetry is so unprofitable there's opportunity for more equality.

NICCOLAI: Yes, for solidarity . . .

DEL GIUDICE: . . . in poverty and misery!

VANGELISTI: As a friend, the poet John Thomas, once said: "None of us are selling out, because nobody's buying."

VERDICCHIO: Questa domanda ha a che fare con la poesia visiva—concrete and visual poetry. Questa, al 'casual observer,' può sembrare non altro che un rifacimento delle idee di Marinetti e i futuristi. Dov'è la differenza fra le due?

NICCOLAI: Senz'altro a me sembra sbagliato dire che sia un rifacimento. Ci sono certe persone che lavorano in quella direzione, Belloli, per esempio. Era un futurista, perciò, che sia ancora un futurista, mi sembra ragionevole. Un'altra persona come Totino, ha senz'altro dentro di sé un'anima futurista. Ma moltissimi altri, come Spatola, o Verdi, fanno dei lavori che non definirei futuristi affatto.

VERDICCHIO: Dove ci portano questi lavori? Verso cosa tendono?

NICCOLAI: Portano al discorso dell'intermedia: la poesia diventa pittura, lo spartito diventa poesia. È un intermixing delle varie arti. Mi pare un concetto molto bello e molto importante.

VERDICCHIO: Lei non ha partecipato al Gruppo '63? E Spatola . . .

NICCOLAI: Spatola faceva parte del Gruppo '63. C'è un'antologia appunto che si chiama *Gruppo '63* ed è uscita nel '63. Io allora facevo la fotografa. Sono stata presente a una riunione del Gruppo

'63 nel '64 a Reggio Emilia, quando avevo intenzione già di scrivere e quel libro lì [*Il grande angolo*, Milano, Feltrinelli, 1966] é uscito nel '66. Dopo questo, il Gruppo '63 parla come se io facessi parte del Gruppo '63. Per *honoris causa*, hai capito. Da notare che nel Gruppo '63 c'erano soltanto due donne, il che é abbastanza interessante: Amelia Rosseli, e Carla Vasio. Io sono stata inglobata dopo. Quando hanno fatto delle pubblicazioni in cui ci sono quelli del Gruppo '63, c'ero anch'io. Ma lì, la vera operazione era quella dei Novissimi, che erano in cinque. Poi nel Gruppo '63 c'erano 40 persone che sono poi andate in tutte le direzioni. Non era un movimento, il vero movimento era dei Novissimi. Poi, lo si é voluto aprire perché era il momento di farlo . . . al livello economico, editoriale . . . Feltrinelli aveva la voglia di fare una letteratura sprovincializzata, e anche da laboratorio. E lo ha fatto per sette, otto anni, dopo di che ha piantato tutto e si é occupato di politica.

VERDICCHIO: Cosa é successo ai Novissimi, all'avanguardia degli anni '60? C'é stata una evoluzione?

NICCOLAI: Io direi che senz'altro, d'interessante, c'é questo: I poeti degli anni '60 in Italia erano, metti, 100. Poi quando c'é stato tutto il movimento studentesco, dal '68 in avanti, più nessuno si occupava di poesia, totalmente scomparsa. Ma subito dopo, quando c'é stato il "movimento" e il terrorismo, e così via, i giovani sono tornati alla poesia. Se allora erano cento i poeti, ora sono mille. E c'é adesso un manierismo anche dello sperimentalismo, però a me sembra interessante che ci siano mille poeti invece che cento. Che poi storicamente ne rimangano cinque, questo é un altro discorso.

VERDICCHIO: Quando si sente parlare di poesia non si sente parlare dell'avanguardia, solo della poesia tradizionale . . .

NICCOLAI: Sono delle ragioni commerciali, perché l'avanguardia vende molto meno. È una letteratura che costringe l'altro a fare quasi lo stesso lavoro di quello che l'ha scritta. L'altra é più una letteratura that soothes you. Obviously, una civiltà come la nostra é tutta basata su: non soffrire, addormentati con la radio, con la televisione, addormentati con il disco, e poi il giorno dopo vai a lavorare in macchina

. . . cioè, tu non stai vivendo *mai*! È chiaro che vende di più l'altra. I grossi editori italiani non hanno mai pubblicato l'avanguardia.

VERDICCHIO: So che la comunicazione fra gli avanguardisti europei è abbastanza buona, quella con gli americani è allo stesso livello?

NICCOLAI: Sì, c'è da parecchi anni. E qui è stata molto importante la poesia concreta e la poesia visiva, che ha potuto rompere queste frontiere linguistiche e far conoscere tutta una generazione. Diventa "mail art," adesso non parlo di quel che arriva per posta, tutte le richieste, io non ce la faccio più proprio, la giornata di ognuno è già piena di altre cose. Però il concetto, che era quello di Ray Johnson, della "mail art," è molto bello.

DEL GIUDICE: Quale influenza hanno esercitato i poeti della "beat generation" americana sul Suo modo e stile di fare poesia? Quando ha avuto luogo questo incontro?*

NICCOLAI: Io ho tradotto per Fernanda Pivano, che ha fatto una grossissima antologia sull'altra America degli anni '60, un cinquecento pagine, ed era nel '68, assieme ad altri tre o quattro, cioè Ballerini, Beltrametti, ecc. Io avevo già letto alcuni "beat." Avevo conosciuto brevissimamente Kerouac a un pranzo a Roma, e . . . È molto difficile rispondere a questa domanda. Dalla loro vita, più che la poesia stessa, è stato significativo per me un certo comportamento. Il fatto che, per esempio, tre o quattro di loro son diventati buddisti, mi ha fatto molto pensare e capire molte cose. Dopo però c'è una grossissima differenza tra quello che loro hanno rappresentato in America nel momento della guerra del Vietnam e da come sono rimbalzati in Europa. A me, essendo bilingue, sono forse rimbalzati in un modo ancora più personale. Per esempio, Burroghs è una persona che mi affascina enormemente, se si considera Burroghs un "beat" in America.

VANGELISTI: Forse di nascosto . . . sì, faceva parte del gruppo. Era in macchina con loro, ma lui aveva altri problemi, altre cose che faceva. Poi viveva a Tangiers.

*This question was provided by Francesca Santovetti, who was not present during the interview.

DEL GIUDICE: Is poetry read in Italy?

NICCOLAI: Very little. Books don't sell, because in Italy everybody—even your friends—expects that you should give them your book. People read very little anyhow, and poetry is only read by people who want to write themselves. More people go to readings, but one cannot tell if these people will buy books of poetry.

DEL GIUDICE: What is poetry's fate in Italy, and in America?

NICCOLAI: It's up to everybody to become a poet, I mean a poet in a wide sense, like for instance, Spatola writing *Verso la poesia totale*. You can be a poet while you are picnicking in a wood, or someone from Los Angeles who is in a wood and is eating his pastrami sandwich. There's a big difference.

DEL GIUDICE: But how does that come about?

NICCOLAI: It's an interior state of being, which I would call harmony, between yourself and what is around you.

DEL GIUDICE: In the meantime, what are you going to do about poetry not being read, and people not going to . . .

NICCOLAI: No one can do anything about things. They just go on writing their poetry. One thing I cannot touch, ever, is power. I'll probably have to reincarnate to go through that trip. But in this life it is something that confuses me too much, takes me out of myself in a way that I cannot go back into myself. So, I cannot become an organizer, or work in a publishing company, or on a paper, or anything like that.

VANGELISTI: Do you feel that you're more read now, as a result perhaps of readings?

NICCOLAI: Definitely.

VANGELISTI: Why do you think you're more read now?

NICCOLAI: Evidently these people that come to readings also buy your book. A lot of people have told me about the *Frisbees*: "Oh, but you know, they're so much better when you read them." So what am I gonna do there?

VANGELISTI: You told me in the car, coming over just before the interview, that Italy, in a way, is one of the hardest countries for a poet to live in. Why do you say that?

NICCOLAI: Italy is still very provincial: whatever is different from what you are, you look at with doubt and diffidence. Anything out of the norm is going to be interpreted as shrewdness: "God only knows what sort of trap is hidden"—so the misunderstanding is unbelievable!

VANGELISTI: We were talking about history, for example. You said that in Italy reality has so escaped people . . .

NICCOLAI: Yes! Because of the corruption, what we read in the papers; it is pure chaos. Everybody says: "If the Vatican was doing business with Sindona, I can screw him, and why not?"

DEL GIUDICE: So, this is why it is so hard to be a poet in Italy?

NICCOLAI: Well, my dear, but there are a lot of people who are missing the poetry and when you get to them and they hear it, they tell you: "We breathe fresh air." It's just a matter of having enough of an opening not to be in a concentration camp. And that they cannot do, because otherwise the political equilibrium . . . they always have to leave a safety valve.

VANGELISTI: On this trip to California you drew an interesting contrast between California (San Francisco, Los Angeles) and New York. How one place is magic and the other place is electricity.

NICCOLAI: Exactly—which is a sort of magic. But the tension that you have in New York is something you can live with for a certain period and then you should get away. Probably one has to get away from everywhere, even from the incredible clearness and reflectivity of California. There is extraordinary spirituality, where you go into someone's house and you understand that every single thing has a meaning and bouncing off of something else. And maybe the perfection is such that you say: "Oh my God, I'd better take my shoes off." Some homes are actual museums, there's something more than just being perfect and neurotic about perfection. There is a ritual in

it, which is very soothing and extremely oriental. This is West, and east is the east coast. But this West is much closer to the East than the east, because between this West and the East, there's only ocean. So I think that things are much more fluid between the two, than when you have all the earth between packed with different meanings.

VANGELISTI: You mentioned that the experience of New York, or the myth of New York, starting with the bubble gum in Italy ("Brooklyn"), is still the strongest American myth in Italy. Is the myth of California really unknown in Italy? Are New York and Italy still part of one world and California part of another?

NICCOLAI: There is, as far as Europe is concerned, a tremendous confusion. They know that Hollywood is in California, so the only thing they think California does is Hollywood.

VANGELISTI: Which is the people from New York who move here.

NICCOLAI: But let's say Brooklyn Bridge is a chewing gum, it is the America of the 50s. But I was on the Golden Gate Bridge the other day and I say it's like an oriental temple . . . and it's called *Golden Gate*. It must have an incredible meaning; it really is opening up to the Orient. I had a feeling that San Francisco was the twin of Istanbul, and a person I admire very much, whose name is Art Beerman, a professor of Philosophy, married to Kathleen Fraser, said: "No, the double of San Francisco is Shanghai." Do you remember the term, "to be shanghaied?" Speaking with Paul last night, he came up with two or three points that corroborate . . . tell them.

VANGELISTI: First, San Francisco—all of California, the whole coast—was called "Gold Mountain" by the Chinese. Then, "shanghaied" was a San Francisco term for when you got drunk in a bar and whoosh . . . out through the trap door, which originated on the Main street of 19th century California (to which even Gertrude Stein and Toklas allude) and that's Pacific Avenue. Pacific Avenue was called, interestingly enough, to go full circle, the "Barbary Coast." And now ethnologists and geographers talk about California's relationship economically, politically, and ecologically, not so much to the United States but to the Pacific Basin.

VERDICCHIO: I come from Vancouver Island, and there too you have a sense of touching the Orient, and therefore there is a feeling of being separated—spiritually and politically—from the rest of Canada.

DEL GIUDICE: You were speaking of Buddhism and spiritualism and of the poet as a spiritual medium. Can you elaborate on that? Do you have some religion or philosophy of your own?

NICCOLAI: While being brought up I was continuously taught that the only world is the materialistic world. That world was not enough for me because I moved around without knowing why I was doing a certain thing. Later I found a spiritual world of my own, and I began to see things from a certain distance and understand and be capable of relating to a much, much wider space.

DEL GIUDICE: Do you belong to any group?

NICCOLAI: No. I don't know if that is pride, or if I'm not mature yet, or if it is another thing still. But I don't . . . ecco! I am absolutely pantheistic. If I love everything I see then I become very, very happy. But if I do not digest things then I get blocked up. So I have learned to do things very quietly; I do not expose myself to a lot of things. Then when one has that strength inside, one comes to the United States for twenty-one days and ba-ba-ba-bang, you see a thousand things. I wanted to write a diary of this trip, but I think that it's going to be too difficult for me. Perhaps because I'm too overwhelmed and 'in it' still.

DEL GIUDICE: Do you feel yourself a cultural mediator? If you do, on behalf of whom?

NICCOLAI: A cultural mediator. Un mediatore culturale.

VANGELISTI: Middle-man.

NICCOLAI: I feel like a pilgrim more than a middle-man.

DEL GIUDICE: A pilgrim going from where to where?

NICCOLAI: Ah, that we don't know.

DEL GIUDICE: A wanderer then.

NICCOLAI: Yes, in a way.

DEL GIUDICE: Has your own cultural identity changed?

NICCOLAI: Since when? It changes continuously. I'm going to be fifty in December and I feel I've already been three different people.

DEL GIUDICE: Which people?

NICCOLAI: That I . . . don't know yet.

VANGELISTI: Same nationality?

NICCOLAI: No, no. Of course not.

VANGELISTI: Which nationalities?

DEL GIUDICE: In which direction are you changing?

NICCOLAI: I think I'm becoming Japanese.

VANGELISTI: You started out being Italian or American?

NICCOLAI: I think I started out very mixed up, therefore both, which I couldn't put together right inside me. They were always interfering one with the other.

DEL GIUDICE: But did you at one point feel you were in equilibrium?

NICCOLAI: Yes, in a way, because now I'm more aware of the differences and I say: "So this attitude is Italian and this is instead Saxon, let's say."

VERDICCHIO: You are an internal 'immigrant.' That's the 'immigrant' process . . .

NICCOLAI: Yes. I just told Herman Sherry this in New York; I said: "I am an immigrant of the soul." Yes, an internal immigrant. Definitely. I don't feel I have a country, you see. I absolutely don't have a country.

DEL GIUDICE: But you're headed towards Japan?

NICCOLAI: The Orient; the Orient is terribly fascinating to me.

DEL GIUDICE: Why? Because of its spiritualism?

NICCOLAI: Yes. Definitely.

Notes:

1. Giulia Niccolai, "Singsong for New Year's Adam and Eve," *Invisible City*, No. 28 (Dec. 1981), pp. 9-10.
2. Adriano Spatola, *Verso la poesia totale* (Torino: Paravia, 1978), p. 77.
 "In ogni caso possiamo dire che tra i due termini, il *poema* e l'*oggetto*, esiste una distanza ipotetica che va verificata sperimentalmente di volta in volta, non nel mondo delle categorie logiche implicate dai modelli; il poema, ad esempio, è per Giulia Niccolai (*Poema & Oggetto*, 1974) il senso più nascosto dell'oggetto, la sua aspirazione verso la leggerezza e l'inutilità: abituati all'oggetto-strumento restiamo perplessi di fronte a questa liberazione, a questa fuga dell'oggetto-strumento da se stesso, a questo orrore che l'oggetto comincia ad avere di sè come strumento. L'estirpazione dello strumento dall'oggetto ha qualcosa di vagamente chirurgico; l'oggetto non è più oggetto ma non è ancora poema, e del resto nessuno sa se riuscirà a diventarlo."
3. Franco Tagliaferro, "Su alcune poesie di Giulia Niccolai," in *Singsong for New Year's Adam and Eve*, TAM-TAM special issue No. 29/b (Sept. 1982), pp. 39-40.
4. Giulia Niccolai, "E. V. Ballad," in *Italian Poetry, 1960-1980: from Neo to Post Avant-garde* (San Francisco & Los Angeles: Invisible City, 1982), p. 74.
5. Giulia Niccolai, "Dai Novissimi," in *Substitution*, trans. Paul Vangelisti and the author (San Francisco: Red Hill Press, 1975), poem No. 1.
6. Simona Weller, "Feminism and Italian Avant-garde Art," from a lecture delivered at UCLA, 1978, *Invisible City*, Nos. 23-25 (March 1979).
7. *Gruppo '63*, a cura di Renato Barilli e Angelo Guglielmi (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976).