

*Nick Pappas on Plato and Wittgenstein,*  
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KATY MARTIN

# Pappas

**KATY MARTIN** has exhibited her work in New York, New England, and Japan, and received an NEA fellowship in painting. Her film about Jasper Johns, HANA-FUDA, has been shown in museums around the world.

The ancient antagonism between philosophy and the arts in terms of Plato's challenge to poetry still sets the tone today. For Pappas, the very notion of a conversation between an artist and a philosopher sets up a philosophical predicament.

One might ask, isn't there such a thing as visual intelligence? The conversation here is not so much about the visual, as it is about philosophy versus poetry. Plato's main rival was Homer, and the difficulty for philosophy is how one uses words. What Nick lays out as the "Platonic challenge" is that artists are too subjective, and therefore their work is idiosyncratic, anecdotal and unable to shed light on any kind of universal truth. Pappas points out that the Platonic challenge completely devalues the nature of poetics, which is only seen within the framework of what philosophy takes itself to be. He outlines the burden this puts on poets — how poets may either refuse to respond at all, or else how they end up apologizing for their art within the terms of philosophy. This also shapes the discussion within philosophy, where even today, to be called a poet is to be dismissed as a philosopher. Pappas talks about two poetic philosophers, Nietzsche and Kierkegaard, who share with artists a desire to redefine subjectivity, to realize the self, and to "become what one is."

Nick Pappas is Associate Professor of Philosophy at City College of New York. He is the author of Plato and the Republic (Routledge, 1995) and a number of articles on Plato's aesthetics, Kierkegaard, and film studies. Currently he is working on a book about Bram Stoker's Dracula and the place of subjectivity in film.

NICK PAPPAS: Last time we talked about “speaking as an artist to a philosopher.” The phrase struck me as interesting and didn’t strike you as at all interesting. I wondered how you would speak to someone as an artist, and you said, “Well, I would speak.” Now when I find something sort of heavy with significance, and someone else doesn’t, that always throws me into a little crisis of meaning. I thought, now why should I have been so struck by that phrase when Katy wasn’t at all. I decided it’s because, if I’m asked to do something or to say something *as a philosopher*, there’s always a specific choice being made there — it’s one thing to do among many — but for an artist to do something *as an artist* doesn’t mean anything in particular, because acting as an artist amounts to a standing possibility. Suppose you’re a chemist and you’re asked to write *as a chemist*. Well, if it’s about chemistry, of course you’ll write it as a chemist, but if it’s an essay about pornography, then it would be ridiculous to think you could write about that as a chemist. If I’m not mistaken, it’s really with

philosophy that the phrase, *write as a philosopher* induces a crisis. Because a philosopher is always someone who has to remember to speak *as a philosopher* and not as something else.

KATY MARTIN: Because there is a certain responsibility?

NP: Well, it’s because it’s one thing you do and not everything you do. My first response was, maybe this is because philosophy is not defined. But I decided that was wrong. If anything, the problem is that philosophy keeps defining itself. So there is always something that is *not really doing philosophy*. And it turns out to be the majority of everything you say, do, think — right? Now I would connect this crisis of vocation with philosophy’s rejection of art. Philosophy is always in a state of defining itself against other things, and *art* really becomes the name for everything else that philosophy doesn’t do. Now why is that?

KM: We were talking about Plato. Why is art whatever philosophy is not? Why does philosophy define itself against art?

NP: Maybe they look more like each other than either of them looks like anything else. Given the problem of naming the philosophical vocation — a problem not matched in art — philosophy is going to respond to the family resemblancy by disinheriting art. In Plato’s case, you have a historical situation in which poetry, and the subtle discussion of poetry, put themselves forward as the moral voice of the community. For philosophy to call itself the arbiter of human life, it had to dethrone poetry.

This still affects how philosophers think about their work. We talked about how Nietzsche is dismissed as more of a poet than a philosopher. It’s not as if we can’t tell the difference between the two lines of work. No one ever mistook Kant or Leibniz for a poet. With *them*, it’s maybe an apology for the way they write. But the opposite name-calling, “He’s a poet, not a philosopher,” has a different animus behind it. It’s a way of casting Nietzsche — or Emerson, Kierkegaard, even Pascal — out of the garden of philosophy. These ges-

tures of dismissal go back to Plato's use of poetry as his foil, almost his metaphor for the opposite of philosophy.

KM: So we're back to basic questions. What is philosophy, and what is art? What do they have in common, and how are they different? We had this whole discussion too about whether philosophy exists, or art exists, or God exists.

NP: Right. Well, there's an apparent analogy between philosophy and art in that, in the last century or so, both of them have been declared dead, as God also has. But the death of philosophy is more like the death of God, in that, if it dies, it never existed. The death of philosophy is not going to be an event, like the death of phrenology or the death of alchemy. Suppose we say painting is dead. That can be translated in a lot of different ways: nobody really cares about painting, or painting doesn't do anything that it was thought of as doing, painting as we know it has no historical project to carry out and so on. But if painting is dead, it doesn't in any way suggest that painting never existed. No matter how metaphorically you take the phrase, "painting is dead," it never implies that painting was never alive. But if we say that philosophy is dead, then what we're saying is that there never really was such a thing as philosophy. Which would mean there never was such a thing as what philosophy took itself to be. It's an old idea, but a good one, that philosophy might be mistaken about its own nature.

KM: It seems to me that philosophy is addressing very broad issues of states of being and trying to deal with issues of meaning.

NP: Some people might think that the questions philosophy has addressed are not important or not real questions. But you could also say that it's not the subject matter of philosophy that doesn't exist, it's what happens to the subject matter when philosophy gets its hands on it. So, in a sense, philosophy can never really talk about what it wants to talk about. It can never capture that essence it is after. That would be what I meant by philosophy having a mistaken conception of itself.

KM: Because it's gotten so abstract?

NP: It is abstract. It's not a matter of philosophy having become corrupted, which might be another way of saying that if philosophy is dead, it was never alive. It's rather that the very first movement into metaphysical thinking already has something wrong with it. That's what I understand to be the lesson of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*. He spends almost no time in that book looking at developed philosophical theories or sophisticated philosophy. He's always probing for the moment at which we begin to ask meaningless, nonsensical questions.

KM: Is that where meaning resides?

NP: No, it's where we think it's going to reside. For example, suppose you're trying to talk about mental experience, the inner life, in a philosophical way. One manner in which that problem gets put into words is a kind of skepticism about minds. That is, that you can't know anyone else's pain. You can't know their toothache, and they can't know your toothache. Then you start making other kinds of arguments. "Well, someone is acting as though he has a toothache, but he might be lying..." Or, "How do I know that my toothache experience is the same thing as her toothache experience?"

KM: So it's the impossibility of transcendence?

NP: It's one way of trying to express this idea of the privacy of sensation. Wittgenstein spends a lot of time on that idea of a private language or a private sensation. And what he shows is that the most intuitive first steps toward a statement like, "I can't know that someone else is feeling a pain," is already loaded with metaphysical assumptions. So what's philosophical in them is not what emerges after lots of books have been written, but it's right there in the first step. Wittgenstein often came to his seminars with detective novels, and would find little passages in them to read aloud. As I recall, there was one where someone was waiting, and the narrator says a few

comments about time, you know, "the emptiness of raw time as it passes." Wittgenstein started talking about this impression we have of time as a kind of substance, time as a framework in which things move. He really thought that anything you were interested in concerning grand philosophical thinking was already present in that first intuitive observation, that first worry about whether time exists.

KM: So the grand philosophical investigation still has shape in those terms? It's still concerned with the nature of existence, the nature of subjectivity...

NP: Oh, it is. It is. In particular ways.

KM: Nietzsche has Zarathustra say, "There is no outside of me, but words and music are the bridge to outside of me." He aestheticizes the whole thing.

NP: Yes. I would say Wittgenstein is suspicious of that first step, of our belief that general statements about time, or the inner life, are going to do what we want them to.

KM: Perhaps he's talking about scale.

NP: What do you mean?

KM: That the grandiose really is contained in the quotidian, the everyday. Bringing it back to art, many artists find it distasteful to talk about issues of meaning in their work, or what art is, or what it's trying to do in the world in the grand scheme of things. But underlying this reticence are all sorts of assumptions about those very issues. Morandi's bottles were humorous and metaphoric. We're happy to use words

like “metaphor,” but not happy to define what the metaphor stands for, because that becomes very clumsy, very quickly. Perhaps this is something that art and philosophy share. We’re more comfortable, in a modern sense, with a parable form.

NP: It goes back to Plato. Artists are still reacting to Plato’s accusations against poetry, mainly that poetry comes out of ignorance. There are two ways in which you can respond. One is by refusing to join the discussion with philosophy.

KM: Is that what ignorance is, exclusive subjectivity?

NP: Plato interprets subjectivity as ignorance, yes.

Toward the end of *The Republic*, after he’s thrown poetry out of the City, Plato has Socrates say, “Of course, if any poet comes to us and can argue for the merits of poetry *in prose* —”

KM: Philosophically.

NP: Philosophically. Then we will admit poetry back into the City. If we are convinced, of course. Any self-respecting poet is going to see this as losing before you begin. I mean, why should philosophy get to determine the vocabulary of the debate?

KM: So you’re saying, one tactic is to say, “Screw that.”

NP: That’s right. “We’re not entering into the discussion because you’ve already set it up so that we’re going to lose the fight.” The other tactic is to try one way or another to show that, as a poet, you are not ignorant. There are various ways in which that is done today.

KM: I think artists apologize a lot.

NP: Yes, they write essays about their work.

KM: Or say, “Look! I’ve been reading philosophy, it does mean something, see?”

NP: That’s exactly the reply to the Platonic challenge, to show that you’re not ignorant. Or to do an installation that’s based on factual matter. I find some artists more sympathetic to saying nothing, some artists more sympathetic to boning up and answering. But those are the two ways in which artists have tried to answer Plato.

KM: Do you think that artists find philosophy to be intimidating? Or useful, like comrades-in-arms?

NP: All of those are possibilities. I’m not sure what artists are reading now. I know a fair number of them were reading Baudrillard, and before that, Derrida, and back in the ’60s it was Wittgenstein. I had a photographer friend tell me that what an artist does with philosophy is misunderstand it



Gregg DeGuire, *Color Xerox*, mixed media, 1996.

until it's interesting. That's one thing you can do. You can treat something as raw material, do whatever you want with it, and not worry about what it's actually saying. Perfectly acceptable. I mean, there's no one thing to do with a pear, why should there be one thing to do with a book of philosophy?

KM: Yes, though that seems to be a characteristic of the artist. The Egyptian symbol for the artist is the thief. We go willy-nilly, exploit, misunderstand, "appropriate," and make something interesting of it. I don't think philosophers can do that, can they?

NP: No, and maybe this is one of the things I was getting at, about speaking as an artist and as a philosopher. It's as if I would have to decide to speak as a philosopher. There are a couple of passages in the earliest works of modern philosophy — one in Descartes, one in Hume — in which they both explore skepticism from different perspectives. Very early on, in Descartes' *Meditations*, he says, "I can't really believe that nothing outside my mind exists. I would be like those madmen who think that they are made of glass or that their heads are gourds." And you think, "Well, at least he knows." And then he says, "But nevertheless..." and he considers another skeptical question that would seem to call the existence of his own body, his own experience, into doubt. I understand that to mean Descartes is saying, "This is how to consider it philosophically. I'm not thinking about these things as a full human being, because then I *would* be a madman. I'm considering these things as a philosopher."

The other example would come from Hume, more than a hundred years later, when Hume is wondering about the self, and about the substantiality of physical objects. And he says, "As I sit in my closet" — which was the English of the day for a study — "I find myself full of doubts, without any way to answer these doubts, about the physical body. But I know that as soon as I go and join the company of my fellows, they will disappear." He goes out to a pub, eats, drinks, talks to people. None of these concerns about the unreality of the mind is going to enter in any way into his discussion. It belongs in his "closet" with his philosophy. Now, I find it very interesting that these philosophers who have come to define what philosophy is in the modern world, should have themselves thought of what they were doing as *one* thing to do. That philosophy is one way of thinking that belongs in a place, and that there is, you might say, the ordinary life on both sides of it.

KM: So philosophy becomes a particular arena.

NP: That's right, which is a problem for it, but it

does seem to be that way, that there's something called "speaking as a philosopher" when you're a philosopher. That speaking as a philosopher is not automatic to a philosopher. It's almost like a special mask they have to put on.

KM: To speak responsibly as a philosopher.

NP: Yes, it's a special kind of pose. In one way it's a specialized activity. In another way, if it's a specialized activity, it can't be what it is.

KM: Because it's too cordoned off?

NP: Yes, because it's not about what it claims to be about. How can you only speak about the nature of the mental, as a philosopher? That would make it seem as though it didn't matter to anything else we do, and that itself is against philosophy's conception of itself. Let me give another couple of examples, because now I think I'm figuring out what I want to say. Take the skeptic who says, "We don't know anything for certain."

KM: Socrates?

NP: No, Socrates just said, "I don't know anything for certain." The philosophical skeptic would apply that accusation not only to all people, but even to things that Socrates himself was sure he knew — that he was sitting in a room, and so on. Now, sometimes the response had been, "Well, the philosopher is using the word, 'know,' in an unusual and technical way. It doesn't mean what 'knowing' means in ordinary life." The problem with that is, then skepticism is not even false. It's something worse than false. The philosopher/skeptic thinks he's talking about the kind of knowing we all usually do, except that we can't do it. So it's not using words in a specialized or technical way, although people often think that's what philosophy is about. It's using the most ordinary words, and using them pretty much in the ordinary way, but somehow ending up saying something extraordinary. So I would say, it's a problem even to think about speaking as a philosopher in that, on the one hand, it's a specialized manner of being; and on the other hand, it can't be specialized. It has to be about everything, and the ordinary, or else it's not what it claims to be.

KM: I can't make the choice to paint not as a painter. I don't have that option. Whereas, if I go about my daily life, it may be informed by the fact that I'm engaged in this odd pursuit. But since I don't use words, and since my art involves making objects, there is no mistaking the two.

NP: Not speaking as a philosopher for a minute...

KM: Okay, yes.

NP: From Plato's perspective, none of the arts deserves to be considered a real entity, a real practice. In the case of poetry, it's not because poets say

false things, or don't know what they're talking about. It's because poetry doesn't say anything. It has nothing to say and can't express it.

KM: Why? Because it doesn't come to these objective philosophical —

NP: Yeah, it's all about the different ways in which Plato diagnoses the subjectivity of poetry — which can be variously ignorance, idiosyncrasy, and passion. In his first real critique of poetry in the dialogue *Ion*, the problem for Plato is the idiosyncrasy of subjectivity. When *Ion* wants to study pots and

pans, he finds every reference to cooking implements in Homer. So he's obviously not prepared to study pots and pans in Hesiod. They're not the same thing. Socrates concludes from this that Homer is not really about pots and pans, he's about Homer-pots and Homer-pans. And so every detail in the Homeric poem is tied into the subjectivity of Homer, thus, the idiosyncrasy. One reason for saying poets don't really say anything, is that they can't speak at that general level about all instances of what they're talking about. That's subjectivity as idiosyncrasy. They're only speaking about themselves. If you take subjectivity as passion, as the emotions, you get another kind of problem, namely, that it's blind. Poetry, by feeding the passions, aligns itself with subjectivity and isn't really saying anything. In that sense, again, there isn't a poetic doctrine. Or to get back to what you said some time ago... art is not about the kinds of things philosophy is about, or at least, that's what Plato would say, because art is not about anything.

KM: Boy...

NP: And can't be about anything, because it's always tainted by subjectivity.

KM: We read history to re-interpret our modern state. But it seems to me, we're still very much stuck in those sorts of issues with art and painting. On the one hand, its entire credibility is because it expresses the individual and is idiosyncratic — that's what makes it believable, what gives it its authenticity. On the other hand, that same subjectivity is what makes it seem stupid and elitist; and makes it irrelevant, and marginalizes it. There's been a lot of sophisticated work in painting around those issues, so you can't say, "Painting is just subjective."

NP: Right.

KM: Since Duchamp, artists have been taking the signature hand out of artmaking. There's been all that work too around "appropriation," or non-authorship, which was supposed to challenge the idea that the art could ever be purely subjective or original.

NP: The trouble with that work though is that we're still tied to the vocabulary of signature, voice and

career. You can't even name the act of appropriation without naming the person who is doing the appropriating. To call something appropriation you have to name the appropriator, which means it's not as objective as it promised to be.

KM: Maybe that's marketing.

NP: And it's definitely career.

KM: Warhol made a lot of jokes about idiosyncrasy and art production, but they still seem to me on the level of jokes, rather than a re-definition of what art is. Art still seems to be about an idiosyncratic vision. Even with large-scale movie productions, like *Citizen Kane*, we talk about authorship. It's not that these are simple, pat categories. But still, art's credibility, or lack of it, is that it's idiosyncratic. Now how does that compare with philosophy? There are authors in philosophy too. It's also idiosyncratic. You're looking for a kind of relevant statement from a particular...

NP: Well, I wouldn't say so.

KM: You wouldn't?

NP: I do think that philosophy is trying to escape idiosyncrasy. That's not to say it's successful — this

isn't the plug for philosophy, for being pro-philosophy or anti-philosophy. It's more to do with what I was saying about the mask that a philosopher has to wear. It was in a comment of Stanley Cavell's about the poses that philosophers from different countries put on. The American tries to sound like a hick, the French philosopher sounds brilliant, and the English philosopher is going to try to sound witty and bored. Why should we have national poses? Well, because there seems to be something uncomfortable about claiming to talk philosophically. Who are we to be covering this material? We use the mask of the philosopher as a way of — not getting away from our subjectivity or our individuality — but, we're trying to set that aside, or not let it fill up what we're talking about. I don't deny what you say about the presence of authors, signature, styles, personal kinds of reasoning in philosophy. But if that's what we decide philosophy is in the end, then it never was what it thought it was.

KM: It's equally ridiculous to take a totally expressionist view of the arts.

NP: Oh, I don't. I'm just saying that it's on the basis of some kind of expressionist view that Plato finds it easiest to condemn the arts and to say that they don't exist.

KM: Actually, the Abstract Expressionist apology was that they were somehow universal. So there you go, they're trying to wiggle out of it by saying, "We are objective. We have this general common denominator!"

NP: Yes, and maybe what Plato would say is: You can be an example of a universal phenomenon without speaking in a universal way. If a dog barks, there's nothing unusual about that, dogs all bark. It doesn't mean the dog is making a general statement about dogs. The dog is just exemplifying what we know to be true about dogs: that they bark. So, even if it's true that what the expressionists express is universal, it doesn't follow that they are saying something universal, they're just serving as examples. Maybe of a lower part of the self, in the way that a dog's bark is an example of what dogs do.

KM: Speaking of a lower part of the self... I'm still bothered by Nietzsche's sense of hierarchical ranking. In *The Genealogy of Morals*, he calls for many voices, many truths, which seems to have a lot of influence today. But he had a clear sense of rank, which he harped on. These days, do we think of the individual as equivalent, even interchangeable? It may well be that through technology our bodies, and even our art, are interchangeable. But yet, to ourselves we are not. We're stuck with who we are. Is the individual still highly idiosyncratic, or are we getting to a state where even that is totally ambivalent?

NP: The first thing I'm inclined to say is, hierarchy and idiosyncrasy might be two different ways of trying to capture the identity of the individual. If you capture it hierarchically, you are defined as an individual by virtue of your place, socially, politically, and economically. Above some, below others. Now suppose you want to maintain some kind of individuality in a world that does not lend itself to hierarchy. Where's the individuality going to come from? One obvious candidate is idiosyncrasy, or privacy.

We look for some ways of distinguishing ourselves from all others, in a world where there are no rankings. By idiosyncrasy I mean we look for the accumulation of every trivial fact of ourselves. None of which we consider essential, but together make a set that no one duplicates. There might be other people who have two brothers and a sister, and are married with this many girls, but they don't also have — and then you can pile up all these other facts, none of which you would want to stake your individuality on, but which together make you just this person. This may be why a lot of people seem attached to their own neuroses.

KM: That's my tag.

NP: Yeah, that's who I am. No one else has exactly this kind of...

KM: Artists in particular.

NP: There's a connection there, sure. Privacy is another possibility. If you focus on the idea that no one can know your sensations, or you can't know anyone else's, you maintain your individuality by interpreting that individuality as the private mind, the secret mind, the thoughts you might be having

that you're not going to tell and that no one else can guess from looking at you. In the movie *Badlands*, Sissy Spacek is riding along with her boyfriend and she spells out sentences to herself, writing them with her tongue on the roof of her mouth one letter at a time. That's a great emblem of secrecy for me, a kind of private knowledge that we're not going to let anybody else have.

KM: But that has to do with individuation and power, as opposed to loss of self and loss of power.

NP: It's the last power we've got, the power to keep our mouth shut. You can have the withholding that goes with privacy, you can have idiosyncrasy. And you can hope to individuate yourself in another way — Kierkegaard outlines another strategy. If you're going to be an individual by means of what's subjective, if there isn't any rank, then what about the one rank that still remains? The difference in rank between a human being and God. You can't define yourself in your social rank, but you can define yourself in your metaphysical or theological rank. It's interesting that all those are ways of preserving individuality when the external definitions of the person have disappeared. When Nietzsche pushes hierarchy back in our faces, I think he's trying to do it the hard way, by keeping hierarchy not as a social phenomenon, but as some new kind of nobility. As if, he thinks that all these other strategies for preserving individuality are fake because they're going in the wrong direction. The only thing that gave us identity was rank, so he's going to return us to a ranking system, because every other ploy for achieving individuality was just a poor substitute.

KM: And the rank has to do with power.

NP: Oh, yeah.

KM: And Will to Power.

NP: And it sometimes overlaps with political power. He doesn't mind acknowledging that. I guess he'd say, if you think that's bad, wait till you live through the alternative.

KM: But again, this whole issue of higher states of being, and the idea that for Plato, poetry comes from the lower parts of the self... I was wondering if

this isn't something that has a whole philosophical history to it. How can you have a higher state of being? Why isn't *being* being? Or is there a hierarchy to being, a nobility to being, which would mimic the older aristocratic hierarchy, but would be based on one's ability to realize one's self?

NP: Well, it won't be automatic. Anyone who said that to be as a human being is automatically to be as a noble human being, would not be so much saying something false, as saying something that no one wants to bother reading. The reason that Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and in another way, Freud, have appeal is that we feel as though we're not fully ourselves.

KM: We desire more.

NP: We want to be something else. Not a different kind of person, but find another way of being the person we already are. And anyone who said, "Actually, everything is fine, you're as noble as you can be, there are no rankings," would not satisfy what brings us to authors like these in the first place, which is the thought that there would be a way of being who you are, but better. Now, to what degree do you want to connect that to being better than others, that's a whole other matter. You might find a way of reading Kierkegaard that emphasizes the differences among human beings, though I think it would be easier to find a way of reading him that emphasizes the differences among different states of the same human being. I don't think social differentiation is intrinsic to what he's doing. What's intrinsic is – and he can only capture this thought with some kind of language of rank – the thought that when we start out trying to figure out who we are, it's with the suspicion that we're not who we should be.

KM: That we're not enough.

NP: That we're not who we are yet. The subtitle to *Ecce Homo* is "How one becomes what one is." Nietzsche took that line from a poem of Pendar's to a young athlete, "Now you should become what you are." It's a line that scholars kept editing out of existence because they said it didn't make sense. But it makes perfect sense. You are something, but now you have to become it, because you are not it in a way a real being would have to be.

KM: I think the ambitions of art are very similar, to provide you with a world where you can be more, where you can realize something.

NP: That's also why philosophers like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche are, in the first place, typically not considered philosophers by other philosophers, and in the second place, do try to seek some kind of reunion with art. The difficulty of talking about the self today might mean that philosophy can no longer do it. That it's the job of art. And that's why someone like Nietzsche, who worries about the crisis of the self, gets called a poet. Because if there is no such thing as a general, universal fact about the human essence, and if we've lost the language for describing our own state of being, then any attempt to communicate the experience of being human is liable to rupture our language, our sense of what a truth is, and maybe our sense of what philosophy can be.⊙