P2P, clothing and material production

An interview with Michel Bauwens

TXT: Bertram Niessen

In the last five years the Belgian theorist Michel Bauwens emerged as one of the main contributors to alternative visions on the relationships among technology, society and development thanks to the so-called peer-to-peer (p2p) theory. P2p can be defined as
"a specific form of relational dynamic, based on the assumed equipotency of its participants, organized through the free cooperation of equals in view of the performance of a common task, for the creation of a common good, with forms of decision-making and autonomy that are widely distributed throughout the network".
As a writer, Bauwens published several seminal texts like "P2P and Human Evolution" and "The Political Economy of Peer Production". He is "community manager" of the P2P Foundation, "an ecology of collaboration consisting of: A wiki which reached 7,000 pages which were viewed 6 million times; a blog with a Google PR rank of 7 and 2,000 readers per day; a Ning community forum with daily activity by 300+ members; and several mailing lists."

Bertram Niessen (BN) and Zoe Romano (ZR): We are witnessing many examples of small, open enterprises that are becoming competitive on the markets because of their p2p approach. Fashion production lays in the middle between material and immaterial production; that's a great challenge from the point of view of new, open and p2p forms of productions and new type of business models. What are the main issues at stake when material production becomes part of the activity?

Michel Bauwens (MB): There are several issues that arise when one moves from the production of 'immaterial' services, such as knowledge and software code, to the shared design for material products.
The first issue is that knowledge is immediately 'consumable' and that code is immediately executable. This means that the very act of creating it, is at the same time making it into use value for others. Creating knowledge and code, or even designs without production, requires the cooperation of human brains, and access to a socialized network such as the internet. This means that capital requirements will be generally lower, as people can also undertake this activity under different conditions, as long as they have some other form of income (unemployed, students and researchers, workers with a 'cognitive surplus', etc ...). However, once we move to the intention of actually making the objects that have been designer, whether those are fashion items, open source cars, or Arduino circuit boards, means having access to capital to purchase either the objects, or even the machinery the make the objects. Thus capital requirements became much more substantial, and the threshold of participation jumps up.
I think there is also a difficulty in terms of the necessary embodiment between the design and the production, as designing objects requires embodied testing in the material world. Finally, this is not a substantive impediment per se but certainly a temporary difficulty, is the immaturity of the collaborative platforms for shared design. They are mostly not yet available in many sectors, but only at the very early stages of construction.

BN and ZR: One of the main features of p2p production is the use of WWW and its tools. In our project, we are experiencing the great importance of local, face-to-face connections. Do you think that this is one of the main differences between collaborating in material and immaterial production?

MB: Yes, this is the sense of my remarks in the previous answer, i..e. the need for embodiment is greater for shared design than shared code. Nevertheless, this is a soft rather than hard polarity. A few years ago, voices could be heard saying that it would be impossible to conceive of peer production for circuit boards or open source cars, yet both have now operational projects. We should not forget that even the shared production of code, actually takes place in communities that have developed all kinds of ways to meet physically. Free software is a very active physical community, not just disembodied cooperators that only work from vast distances. So, it's really a matter of degree.

BN and ZR: In the communities related to content and code production the efficiency and efficacy of open and p2p approach has been clearly visible since many years. At the same time, in the fields of material production positive aspects are still a bit ambiguous (especially in the less "geeky" ones, like fashion) because personal work is still tangled with the myth of individual creativity and the aura of authorship. How could we accelerate the steps toward toward a more clear vision of the benefits of p2p production?

MB: I think this is mostly a generational issue. Established designers from previous generations have been habituated to a mode of gaining success and recognition that is based on this myth of individual creativity. But the new generations are not only steeped in the new culture, but, as yet unproven individuals, have everything to gain by sharpening their experience in creative and collaborative communities. So I think that this cultural shift will take time, but it will take place. This being said, peer production modes should not be expected to be the only alternative possible, but will be part of a mix, consisting of modes of production between a continuum of individual vs. community. There will be collective kitchens, but there still will be 3-star restaurants run in a very authoritarian manner, just as there will be movies run by strong directors. The only thing I would insist on is that generally speaking, the core of value creation in knowledge, code and design, will be produced in commons-driven environments, but saying that this is the new core does not make it a claim to being a new totality.

BN and ZR: One of the main characteristics of clothing is that it's mainly based on implicit knowledge related to crafts. Such knowledge is sometimes very difficult to share through technological means. At the same time, such kind of communication is a fundamental milestone for future developments of material p2p production. What's your opinion about it?

MB: I think the evidence is already out there to see, i.e. there is a undoubted revival of crafts and craftivism, that happens locally through affinity communities, but at the same time, intensively uses online tools for both community building and sharing designs. I actually think the revival of crafts is directly linked to the networks. We really have to step out of the physical-virtual dichotomy. We have one body and one mind, and it uses both the physical and the virtual, in a continuous mixing, and different human practices require different optimal mixes. But fashion and crafts are optimally suited for a very strong online collaboration component. I think our perception of this might be skewed if we only look at the traditional fashion business, but there is a whole alternative counter-economy that is growing around online collaboration, that is already very strong and parallel with the old practices.

BN and ZR: Interdisciplinarity is the field where most of the innovation happens. For example when programmers meet with fashion designers, or crafters meet with fablabbers. One of the main challenges that we are facing though, is the attempt to find ways of communication beyond diverse cultural backgrounds, disciplines and educational levels. What are the positive and negative aspects that you experienced? How can we improve this communication?

MB: Cooperation across disciplines is difficult, period, and this is just as true in the offline world than online. It requires substantial physical and immaterial cooperation in order to create the kind of culture that will allow for smooth communication to occur. There is nothing magical about technology that somehow would obviate for the hard cultural and intersubjective work that needs to occur for cooperation to be possible. But I would suggest that we are seeing a needed shift from inter-disciplinary, where disciplines are playing hardball to preserve their respective domains, a stance which is very counterproductive to cooperation, as we can witness everyday in academia, to a new vision and practice of trans-disciplinarity. In this vision and practice, the object of cooperation is primary, and around that object to be created, equipotential individuals with various skills and capabilities self-aggregate to see what their most optimal contribution can be. In such a object-centered mode, cooperation becomes much more easier.