

STAGING MODERN LIFE:

Hannes Meyer's Co-op Interior and the Limits of the Avant-Gardes

Iris Giannakopoulou Karamouzi

SCENOGRAPHIA, IMMAGINE FOTOGRAFICA, AVANGUARDIA

Nel 1926, Hannes Meyer pubblicò una fotografia intitolata “Die Wohnung” (L'appartamento) per illustrare il suo saggio *Die Neue Welt* (Il nuovo mondo). Oggi nota come “*Co-op Interior*”, l'immagine mostra pannelli di tessuto, un tavolo pieghevole con un grammofo, una sedia pieghevole e un lettino da campo: un interno allestito ma mai abitato. Questo articolo propone una rilettura scenografica del *Co-op Interior*, collocandolo nella storia del rapporto tra architettura e scenografia che Manfredo Tafuri ha tracciato in *La sfera e il labirinto*, attraverso le avanguardie teatrali dei primi anni del XX secolo. Il *Co-op Interior* viene qui interpretato come un terzo termine in contrapposizione ai due estremi opposti di Tafuri – una città totale e un silenzio totale –, basandosi sui dialoghi teatrali che Meyer mette in scena nella sua stessa serie “Co-op”, tra cui il “Co-op Vitrine” e il “Co-op Theatre”, allestiti per l'esposizione cooperativa di Gand del 1924, e nel suo stesso saggio *Die Neue Welt*. Letto alla luce della descrizione di Tafuri della dialettica della negazione dell'avanguardia, il *Co-op Interior*, in quanto immagine messa in scena, mantiene aperta, anziché risolvere, la questione avanguardista tra arte e vita, teatro e città, individuo e collettività. L'articolo si conclude con la ricostruzione del 2019 del *Co-op Interior* al Bauhaus Museum di Weimar, che ripristina una dimensione a misura d'uomo e percorribile che la fotografia aveva nascosto, chiedendosi cosa ciò riveli di ciò che rimane oggi della negoziazione dell'avanguardia con la *mise-en-scène*.

SCENOGRAPHY, PHOTOGRAPHIC IMAGE, AVANT-GARDE

In 1926, Hannes Meyer published a photograph titled “Die Wohnung” (The Apartment) to illustrate his essay Die Neue Welt (The New World). Now known as the Co-op Interior, the image shows fabric panels, a folding table with a gramophone, a folding chair, and a camp bed, an interior staged but never inhabited. This article proposes a scenographic rereading of the Co-op Interior, situating it within the history of the relationship between architecture and scenography that Manfredo Tafuri mapped in The Sphere and the Labyrinth, through the theatrical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century. The Co-op Interior is read here as a third term against Tafuri's two opposed endpoints, a total city and a total silence, building on the theatrical dialogues Meyer stages across his own Co-op series, including the Co-op Vitrine and Co-op Theatre, staged for the 1924 Ghent cooperative exhibition, and in his essay “The New World” itself. Read against Tafuri's account of the avant-garde's dialectics of negation, the Co-op Interior, as a staged image, holds open, rather than resolves, the avant-garde question between art and life, theatre and city, the individual and collective. The article closes on the 2019 reconstruction of the Co-op Interior at the Bauhaus Museum Weimar, which restores a body-scale, walkable dimension the photograph had withheld, asking what this reveals about what remains today of the avant-garde's negotiation with the mise-en-scène.

Iris Giannakopoulou Karamouzi
Yale University
giannakopoulou.iris@gmail.com

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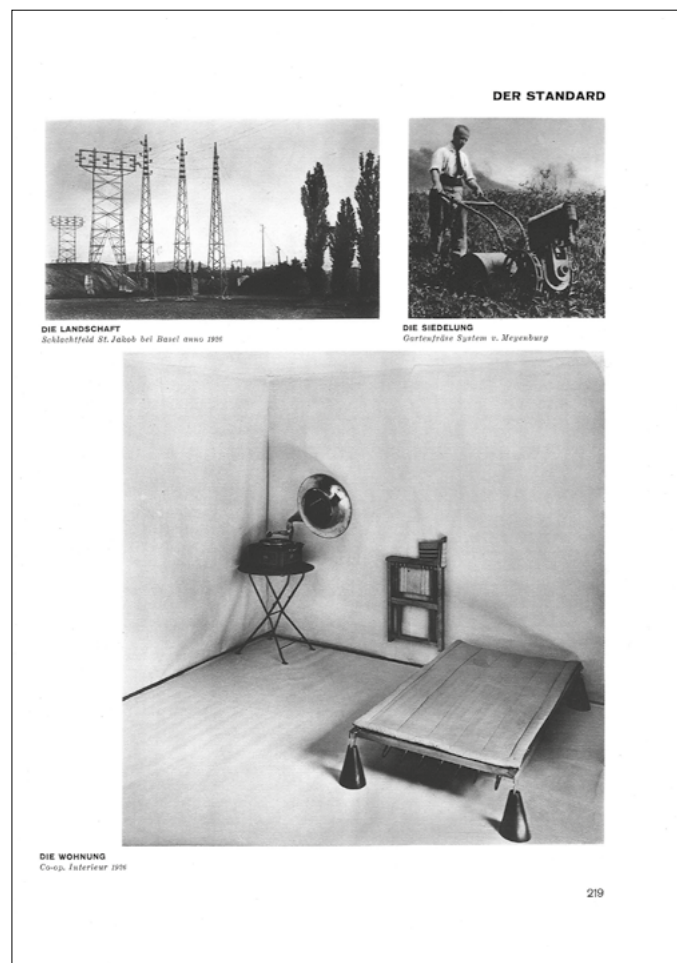
The Scene

In 1926, Hannes Meyer published a photograph in the influential Swiss monthly journal *Das Werk* to illustrate his essay “Die Neue Welt” (The New World) (Meyer 1926). Captioned “Die Wohnung” (The Apartment), it depicted no apartment in any conventional sense. What it showed instead was a staged scene: white fabric panels serving as walls, a nondescript floor, and a minimal set of objects—a folding table topped with a gramophone, a folding chair attached to the panel, and a camp bed resting on four cones (Figure 1). The published image was cropped from a wider photograph taken by Theodor Hoffmann, which also included a wall-mounted shelf unit holding jars of everyday consumables and, next to it, a second, open chair (Figure 2).

The Co-op Interior, as it is alternatively known, remains one of the most rehearsed images in the historiography of modern architecture. Its ascetic quality, transient character, and conspicuous absence of occupants have been variously read as a “counterpoint to private property” (Fezer et al. 2015), “the embodiment of an uprooted way of life” (Aureli and Tattara 2018), or the crystallization of the “post-humanist subject” (Hays 1995). A whole critical apparatus has been brought to bear on the image as a domestic space, treating it as symptomatic of the modern metropolitan experience that Georg Simmel had diagnosed a generation earlier (Simmel 1903). Yet, as Raquel Franklin notes, the Co-op Interior “was not supposed to be a space to live in” but “to illustrate certain principles” (Fezer et al. 2015, 29). Meyer did not design a room; he staged a scene. It existed from the outset as a photograph circulating in the reproducible register that Walter Benjamin associated with modern technological media (Benjamin 1935). This paper argues that the Co-op Interior should be understood as a photographic setting rather than as a lived-in interior, and that this shift in category, from dwelling to staging, resists existing readings that approach it primarily through the vocabulary of domesticity.

The stakes of such a reframing are not merely interpretative. They situate the Co-op Interior within the history of the theatrical avant-gardes of the early twentieth century that Manfredo Tafuri traced in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (Tafuri 1987). Throughout this history, the theatrical stage becomes the site where the contradictions of metropolitan modernity are absorbed and reorganized in pursuit of what Tafuri identifies as the avant-garde's “Simmel-like nostalgia for a metropolitan totality” (Tafuri 1987, 107). This trajectory moves from the “anti-illusory” spaces of Adolphe Appia and George Fuchs (Tafuri 1987, 98), through the dadaist and futurist cabaret as crucible of the “metropolitan grotesque” (Tafuri 1987, 98), to Vsevolod Meyerhold's constructivist theatre as a “living machine” (Tafuri 1987, 109). It culminates in Walter Gropius's *Totaltheater*, conceived as “a counter-city” (Tafuri 1987, 109), before arriving at Mies van der Rohe's 1929 Barcelona Pavilion, which, “conscious of the impossibility of restoring ‘synthesis’” (Tafuri 1987, 111), marks the exhaustion of the avant-garde's project.

Meyer's Co-op Interior, produced precisely at this historical juncture, sits uneasily within this trajectory. Rather than resolving the question of the relation between art and life, city and theatre, the individual and the collective that the avant-garde theatre staged throughout these experiments, it suspends it, holding it open at the scale of a room. The argument proceeds in three moves. First, it places the Co-op Interior within Meyer's own Co-op series and within the theatrical dialogues of “The New World” essay. Second, it examines this dialogue within the genealogy of the theatrical avant-gardes that Tafuri traces. Third, it tests this reading against the Co-op Interior's most recent afterlife: its three-dimensional reconstruction at the Bauhaus Museum in Weimar, which restores to the image the very body-scale presence the photograph had intentionally withheld.



1
Hannes Meyer, *Die Wohnung*
(The Apartment). "Die Neue
Welt." *Das Werk* 13 (7): 219

2
Hannes Meyer, Co-op Interior,
1926. Photograph by Theodor
Hoffmann. gta-Archiv, ETH
Zurich, Hannes Meyer Estate



3
Hannes Meyer, Siedlung
Freidorf (Siedlung Estate),
Basel, Switzerland, 1919–21.
Photograph by Theodor
Hoffmann. Staatsarchiv Basel-
Landschaft

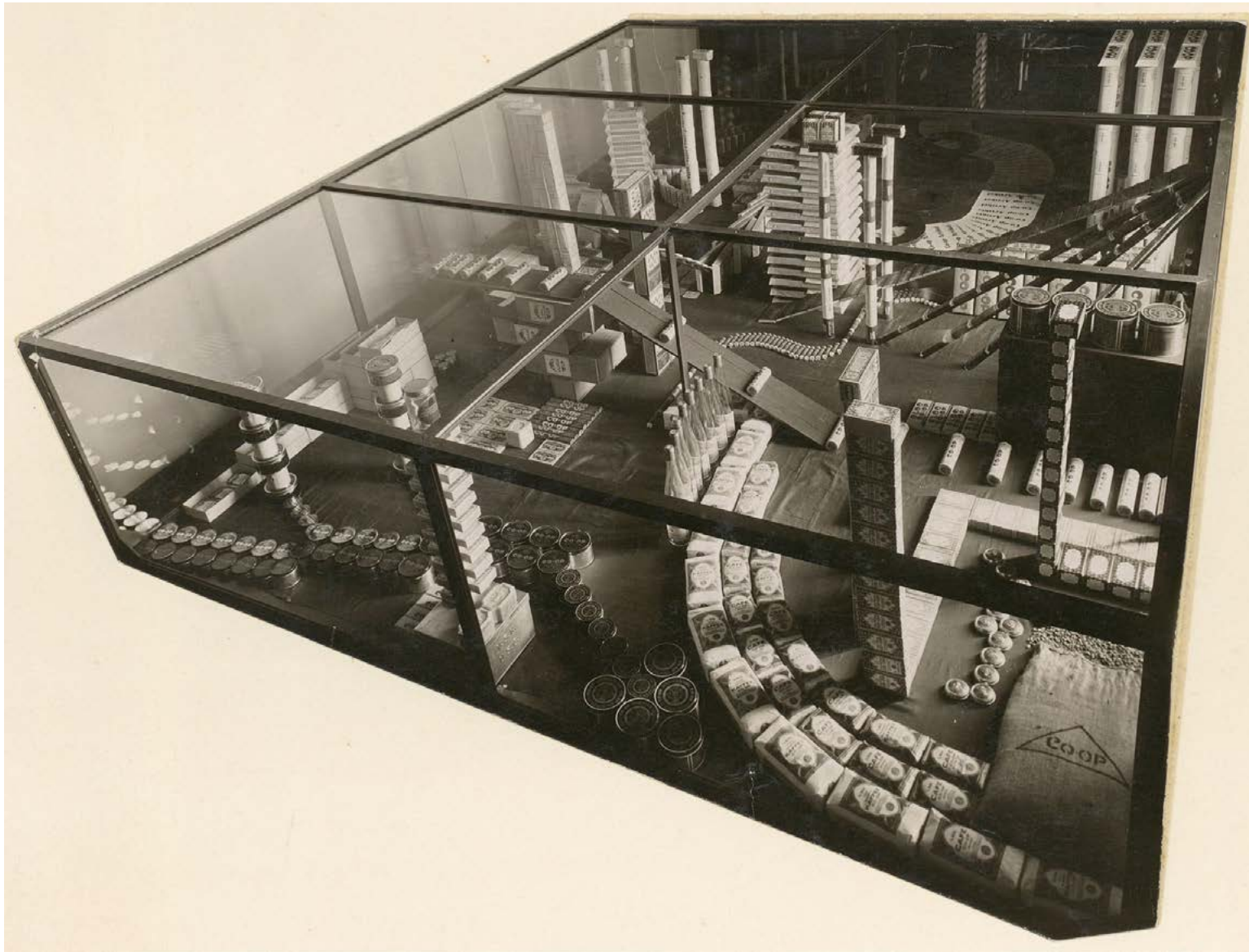
4
Hannes Meyer, installation
for the Federation of Swiss
Consumer Cooperatives, first
International Cooperative
Exhibition, Ghent, Belgium,
1924. gta-Archiv, ETH Zurich,
Hannes Meyer Estate



The Co-op Series and its Theatrical Dialogues

The Co-op Interior belongs to a series of interrelated projects titled "Co-op" that Meyer developed between 1923 and 1926 as "educational propaganda" for the cooperative movement, in which he was an active participant (Aureli and Tattara 2018). From 1921 until 1926, Meyer lived at the Siedlung Freidorf near Basel, one of the first large-scale cooperative estates in Switzerland, which he designed for the Swiss Cooperative Union (Figure 3). In 1924, Meyer designed the presentation for the Federation of Swiss Consumer Cooperatives for the first international cooperative exhibition in Ghent, Belgium (Figure 4). The installation had two distinct parts. At one end stood the Co-op Vitrine, a glass display showcasing thirty-six standard cooperative products, "stacked and arranged as if at the end of production assembly lines" (Borra 2013) (Figure 5). At the other end, during the night, the curtain rose on the Co-op Theatre (Figure 6). The theatre presented four mute pantomime scenes written by Meyer himself, each staging through bodily performance a different aspect of the cooperative system: "work (private enterprise and wage labour); clothes (a man finds happiness in the co-op clothes); dream (about the possibility of different conditions); trade (cutting out the middleman)" (Borra 2013).

Bernadina Borra connects the Co-op Theatre to Meyer's contemporary Bertolt Brecht, particularly Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (estrangement effect): "the alienation that is necessary to all understanding" (Borra 2013). Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara similarly note that, like Brecht, Meyer did not want the audience "to stare romantically at the idyll of cooperativism, but to assess this way of life and take a position" (Aureli and Tattara 2018). They go even further, describing "the ostensible theatricality of Co-op Interieur" as "an extension of the scenography that Meyer designed for his Theatre" (Aureli and Tattara 2018).



Yet, the Theatre depended on the presence of a spectator before a live performance to activate this effect. The Interior required neither actor nor spectator. It reached its public as a photograph. It was, from the outset, in Benjamin's terms, a work "designed for reproducibility" (Benjamin 1935), allowing its pedagogical function to circulate beyond the specific conditions of its production and display and to "meet the beholder...in his own particular situation" (Benjamin 1935).

In "The New World," Meyer further develops his theatrical dialogues. The article itself is organized as a scenographic taxonomy of modernity, structured under categorical headings, *Die Bühne* (The Stage), *Das Photographische Bild* (The Photographic Image), *Die Ausstellung* (The Exhibition), *Die Propaganda* (The Propaganda), *Der Standard* (The Standard), *Der Film* (Film), among others, each populated with images that occupy more pages than the text. The opening page is headed by a full-width reproduction of Natan Altman's *Revolutionsprojekt für die Umgestaltung eines Platzes in Leningrad*, staged in 1918 to celebrate the first anniversary of the October Revolution, where constructivist forms are inserted directly into the existing urban fabric. Altman's project belongs to what Tafuri

describes as the Soviet "art of the festival" (Tafuri 1987, 100), the moment when the avant-garde sought to dissolve the boundary between the theatrical event and urban life. Meyer places this image before the title; at the very threshold of "the new world" he is about to describe. For after Altman, as Tafuri notes, "the theatre no longer goes to the city; it is the city that re-enters the theatre" (Tafuri 1987, 102).

Under "The Stage," Meyer reproduces two photographs of Vsevolod Meyerhold's Moscow productions: *Der Wald* (The Forest), where the stage is arranged as a system of diagonal ramps and platforms that turn performers into moving parts of a kinetic theatrical apparatus, and *Tarelkin's Tod* (The Death of Tarelkin), designed by Varvara Stepanova, whose geometric pieces—a slatted cage, a cylindrical drum, a table—present the stage as a "living machine" (Tafuri 1987, 101). Tafuri reads Meyerhold as a turning point: where "the mass revolutionary festivals" (Tafuri 1987, 102) reconfigured the city through new, revolutionary forms, the avant-garde, Tafuri argues, was no longer concerned simply with "the destruction of old churches" but with penetrating "into the interior of the productive processes" (Tafuri 1987, 101). Meyerhold stages this shift by bringing the logic of the modern factory floor directly into the theatre through the "reconciliation between work and play" (Tafuri 1987, 101).

The Co-op Vitrine belongs to this same tradition. Like Meyerhold, it foregrounds the material apparatus of collective production, "demonstrating how co-operation can disenthral man from capital" (Borra 2013). As Meyer writes in "The New World": "The surest sign of true community is the satisfaction of the same needs by the same means. The upshot of such a collective demand is the standard product. The folding chair, roll-top desk, light bulb, bathtub, and portable gramophone are typical standard products... They are apparatus in the mechanization of our daily life... The degree of our standardization is an index of our communal productive system" (Meyer 1926). This helps explain why Meyer places the Co-op Vitrine not under "The Stage" or "The Exhibition" but under "The Propaganda," a term that in its original sense means the propagation of a principle. Grouped alongside a cinema poster and a newspaper brochure, it belongs to the same category as the printed page and the film: media designed to circulate ideas beyond the immediate site of production. The Co-op Interior appears in the essay under "The Standard," grouped alongside a photograph of a man operating a motor-driven rotary tiller and an image of a medieval battlefield now occupied by electric power poles. Together, these images present standardization as a productive system penetrating every scale of human environment, from the room to the territory.

Under "The Photographic Image," Meyer reproduces two photograms by László Moholy-Nagy: photographs made without a camera by placing objects on photosensitive paper and exposing it to light. Where Meyerhold's stage still needed a performer to activate the theatrical machine, his "biomechanic acrobat" (Tafuri 1987, 102), Moholy-Nagy's photogram needs no one. As Tafuri puts it, here, "technology itself can 'speak'" (Tafuri 1987, 103). Meyer describes the photogram in similar terms: "Instead of a copy of light reflections, we use light itself to create with" (Meyer 1926). For Tafuri, Moholy-Nagy marks another yet stage in the avant-garde imagination toward modern technology's organizational capacities, a logic that culminates in his *Theatre of Totality*, coordinating light, sound, film, and space into "the new productive universe," not unlike Walter Gropius's *Totaltheater*, "an instrument constructed approximately like a typewriter" offering "a global alternative to the real" (Tafuri 1987, 109).

Across the theatrical dialogues Meyer stages in "The New World" essay, the avant-garde promise was that modern life could be transformed from a source of alienation into a basis for collective liberation. It is precisely this promise that Meyer's Co-op Interior inherits and complicates. Yet this promise of liberation was not without contradictions, and it is precisely those contradictions that the Co-op Interior relocates from the theatrical stage to the scale of the room, where standardization, cooperation, and everyday life become the objects of design.



6
Hannes Meyer, Co-op Theatre,
International Cooperative
Exhibition, Ghent, 1924. Four
mute pantomime scenes,
written by Meyer, staged
different aspects of the
cooperative system through
bodily performance: work,
clothes, dream, and trade.
gta-Archiv, ETH Zurich, Hannes
Meyer Estate

The Adventures of the Avant-Gardes

Here Meyer comes closest to the avant-garde dialectics of negation that Tafuri maps in *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*: the destructive impulse that Tafuri associates with the avant-gardes. For Tafuri, this was not simply nihilism but a way of clearing the old for the new to emerge, a way of recovering however briefly “a portion of unalienated space” (Tafuri 1987, 96). It is the same impulse that Aureli reads in the Co-op Interior through Benjamin’s figure of the destructive character, the one who “knows only one watchword: make room. And only one activity: clearing away” (quoted in Aureli 2013, 121). On this reading, the emptiness of the Co-op Interior is a kind of clean sweep, stripping out the clutter of objects Benjamin saw as the bourgeois interior’s compensation for the anonymity of modern life, what Aureli reads as “a philosophy of the tabula rasa” that opens the “possibility for a form of life uprooted from the sense of possession represented by the domestic interior” (Aureli 2013, 121).

Tafuri’s genealogy, however, shows where these negative dialectics lead when pursued to their conclusion. The earliest avant-garde performances staged the shock of modern life, turning it into spectacle, into what Tafuri calls the “desacralized world of the futurist and dadaist puppet” (Tafuri 1987, 102). Constructivist theatre pushed further, attempting to turn modern alienation into “a collective work-festival” (Tafuri 1987, 101), but even this, Tafuri argues, remained a form of theatre, separate from real life. A later phase tried to close that gap entirely: Moholy-Nagy’s *Theatre of Totality* and Gropius’s *Totaltheatre* both attempted to reconstruct the theatre as a total substitute for modern reality, “the hymn of victory of the negative that has taken over the real from which that theatre tries to isolate itself” (Tafuri 1987, 110). But if, as Tafuri argues, the real city is already its own kind of theatre, any such “counter-city” is eventually swallowed back into it. What is left, at the end of this trajectory, is the Barcelona Pavilion, “a place of absence” where the visitor wanders among “empty and isolated signifiers, in which things are portrayed as mute events” (Tafuri 1987, 111–12). For Tafuri, this is the avant-garde’s endpoint once its destructive impulse has been exhausted. In *Architecture and Utopia*, Tafuri explains why (Tafuri 1976). The avant-garde’s true function was not to negate the modern metropolis but to train its inhabitants to absorb its contradictions, ultimately leaving architecture “obliged to return to pure architecture, to form without Utopia; in the best cases, to sublime uselessness” (Tafuri 1976, ix).

This is the impasse against which the Co-op Interior needs to be read. Aureli’s reading of its emptiness as a radical clearing may be true, but it keeps Meyer within these negative dialectics. To read the Co-op Interior only as clearing is to focus on what has been removed; to read it as a scenographic staging is to ask what the objects that remain are doing as a *mise-en-scène*, in Silvia Cattiodoro’s sense of a space organized for an implied body and gaze (Cattiodoro 2007). Those objects are “neither right nor wrong, neither public nor private, but simply instruments, perhaps crude”—stripped of ownership, identity, and accumulation, reduced to the act of use (Aureli and Tattara 2018). Yet it is those objects precisely that hold the image in a productive ambivalence, at once a rendering of “our increasingly precarious domestic life” and a “harbinger of space for anyone like a universal basic right” (Aureli and Tattara 2018) as Aureli and Tattara themselves acknowledge. Whereas Mies’s Pavilion as a “scenic space” (Tafuri 1987, 111) marks a dialectic that has run its course, the Co-op Interior as a scenographic device retains its critical force by refusing to settle the question.

The payoff of reading it this way is precise. As a *mise-en-scène*, the image implies a body and a gaze but supplies neither. One candidate for that body is the viewer: whoever is looking at the photograph, since no figure within the frame claims the role. But the image does not settle on the viewer any more than it settles on a cooperative worker, a rootless metropolitan subject, or a bourgeois tenant; it simply holds the position available, to be filled by any of them. To fix that body, or its use of the room’s objects, would settle who cooperation was for and what it would look like in practice. Where the Co-op Vitrine exposed it through the standardized object and the Co-op Theatre performed it in front of a live audience, the Interior withholds it and, existing only as a photograph rather than a built or performed space, withholds it indefinitely, circulating without settling into either position. To declare it either a critique of capitalism or an accommodation within it would be to subsume it within the very dialectic that in Tafuri’s account always ends in “the absoluteness of silence” (Tafuri 1987, 111). It is not a promise of a new form of life, like the Co-op Theatre, nor a substitute for alienation, like the Co-op Vitrine. It is a stage with no performer and no live event and a room with no occupant nor trace of occupation, only an implied viewer, addressed wherever and whenever the photograph is seen. Whether this amounts to a defeat or a possibility is a question the Co-op interior leaves open.

7
Reconstruction of Hannes
Meyer’s Co-op Interior,
permanent collection, Bauhaus
Museum, Weimar, 2026.
Photograph by the author



What Remains?

The Bauhaus Museum in Weimar makes the point concrete. The last section of the permanent exhibition asks what remains of the Bauhaus as a social and political project. This is precisely what the call for this issue of *4A Journal* asks: what remains of scenography once its “deeper aesthetic and project-based meaning” has been reduced, in much contemporary design narrative, to “a superficial association with visual impact, amazement, or sensationalism.” At the end of the room, a reconstruction of the Co-op Interior stands within a black steel frame: white sheets and black cutouts reproducing Meyer’s mobile panels and carefully arranged objects, all visible through the frame from which cutouts of the original photographs hang (Figure 7). A staging operation not unlike the one Thea Brejzek and Lawrence Wallen identify as the “autonomous model” where built structure and set design meet in a single scalar object that “lay claim to something, in that they propose a reality by their sheer object status” (Brejzek and Wallen 2008, 12). The exhibition caption states: “Hannes Meyer staged his design principles in a photograph, titled ‘Co-op Interior’ of 1926: dwellings were to exemplify mobility, functionality, and standardization.” Yet the curators’ reconstruction restores to the Co-op Interior a body-scale, three-dimensional presence that Meyer’s photograph did not have. No longer a circulating image but a scaled, frameable, walkable proposition, the Weimar reconstruction activates what the photograph held in reserve. The modern subject the photograph refused to fix is replaced, here, by the museum visitor. In supplying that body, the reconstruction throws into relief exactly what the photograph had achieved by withholding.

Surrounded, in the Weimar galleries, by the famous Bauhaus chairs and lamps, products of a design culture long since absorbed into commodity capitalism they were meant to critique, the Co-op Interior stubbornly refuses to resolve into “a productive structure disguised as the imaginary” (Tafuri 1987, 112). If the avant-gardes Tafuri traced ultimately reached an impasse in their attempt to reconcile art and life, stage and city, the collective and the individual, then Meyer’s Co-op Interior as a scenographic device suggests a different avenue: not the resolution of these tensions but their deliberate suspension, a spatial proposition that keeps possibility open, refusing to settle in either utopian promise or critical negation. In doing so, it suggests that what remains from the adventures of the avant-gardes may not yet have been exhausted.

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