



Yiwucore: Infrastructure as Aesthetic
Laura Yuile - studio@laurayuile.com

Figure 1. Yuile, L. (2025). *[Untitled]*. Yiwu, China.

I arrived in Yiwu for the first time with the intention of searching for objects in the way a curator might discover artworks for an upcoming exhibition. I wanted to find mass-produced commodities that contained artistic characteristics and might function as contemporary readymades. I imagined isolating singular forms within the vastness of the International Trade City, extracting moments of excess or unintended poetry. Instead, what asserted itself was not the object but the field: fluorescent illumination, plastic density, modular shelving, and commodities categorized and repeated across multiple floors and a network of corridors. It was not spectacular. It was infrastructural, functional, almost aggressively ordinary - yet I began to read it as an aesthetic (Fig. 1).

Yiwu is known as the ‘small-commodity city,’ being home to the largest small commodities market in the world. It is a small city by Chinese standards and is largely structured around the global circulation of inexpensive, everyday goods (Hulme, 2015). Hulme’s (2015) account of Yiwu situates the city within the dynamics of global consumer needs and everyday economies, foregrounding its role as both marketplace and urban condition. What struck me during my own fieldwork was not simply the scale of trade, but the spatial and visual grammar produced by this scale. The International Trade City is organised through taxonomic repetition: aisles of near-identical objects - mops, wigs, calculators, inflatable toys, seasonal decorations - displayed in bulk. Units multiply; difference collapses. Yiwu’s International Trade City can perhaps be understood through what Easterling (2014) describes as infrastructural ‘active form’ - a spatial formula that travels, replicates, and adapts across territories. The trade centre is not singular; it is a protocol. Its organisational logic disperses with the commodities themselves, embedding a repeatable grammar of display within distant urban environments. The aesthetic, if it can be called that, is not located in individual commodities but in repetition and categorization.

Crucially, this repetition does not terminate in Yiwu. The goods on display are destined for export; they disperse outward through shipping networks, e-commerce platforms, discount retailers and informal markets. As Appadurai (1986) suggests, commodities do not remain fixed within singular economic contexts but

acquire social and cultural meanings through circulation. Yiwu functions as one such circulatory engine: a logistical hub from which small commodities echo endlessly across global retail environments.

My proposal of *Yiwucore* emerges from this recognition. The term draws on the proliferation of ‘-core’ aesthetics online - dreamcore, mallcore, weirdcore, liminalcore - categories that crystallise visual atmospheres into named categories. A *core* is less a style than a recognition pattern: it stabilises a mood through repetition and circulation. To frame Yiwu as *Yiwucore* is therefore to apply an aesthetic suffix to a space organised around function, while also acknowledging the systems of recognition through which contemporary visual culture increasingly operates: search terms, e-commerce categories, tags, keywords and algorithmic sorting.

The International Trade City is designed for the efficiency of wholesale international consumption, not aesthetic or conceptual contemplation. Its purpose is circulation: the making of profit-generating deals with international buyers. To approach it as an immersive installation or aesthetic atmosphere is to overlay an interpretative framework onto a logistical infrastructure. By suspending the assumption that infrastructure is merely background, I began to examine how repetition, taxonomic ordering, and accumulation generate a perceptual field that resonates with digital platform aesthetics.

The aisles resemble the infinite scroll. Product categories echo tagging systems. Identical objects arranged side by side evoke tiled interfaces. Walking through the trade centre felt less like shopping and more like inhabiting a materialised database. As Manovich (2001) argues, databases represent a dominant cultural form of contemporary media, privileging collections, categories and navigable structures over linear narrative. This resemblance extends beyond appearance. Digital platforms organise abundance through categorisation, searchability, repetition and endless navigability; Yiwu performs these operations spatially. Movement through the market is structured through taxonomies rather than narrative. One does not move from beginning to end, but from category to category: socks to wigs to artificial flowers to LED toys. Like online retail platforms,

orientation becomes less dependent on geography than on indexing. The International Trade City therefore appeared less like a marketplace and more like a physical interface: a logistical infrastructure in which classification itself becomes spatial experience.

At the same time, the space resists aesthetic assimilation. Workers and their children nap and eat among commodities. Boxes are unsealed and resealed. Objects spill beyond their assigned grids before being recontained. Language slips across surfaces: English phrases printed on hats and mugs are often syntactically incorrect; translation hovers between error and invention. The market operates through approximation. *Yiwucore*, then, is not a celebration of surface but an attempt to remain with the tension between logistical clarity and perceptual excess. It names an aesthetic that emerges unintentionally from standardisation and circulation. Yet in naming it, I risk imposing coherence where none is intended.

If Yiwu is the hub, the echo unfolds elsewhere. Once the perceptual frame is established, similar configurations become legible across urban environments. I began noticing them repeatedly after returning to Xiamen and later to London: electronics malls where phone cases extend floor-to-ceiling across multiple units; British discount retailers where seasonal products spill beyond shelving systems into temporary aisles; wholesale environments where navigation becomes less about destinations and more about moving between categories. These spaces are locally distinct from Yiwu, yet share a recognisable grammar of density, categorisation and modular repetition. The perceptual frame established in Yiwu begins to travel.

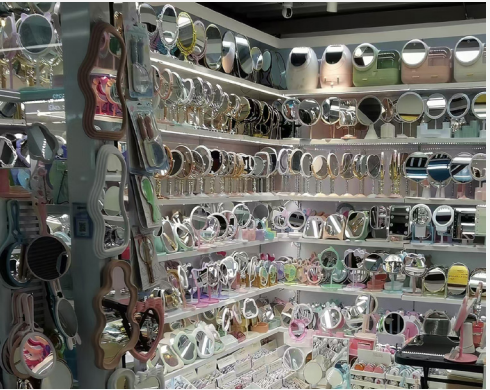


Figure 2. Yuile, L. (2025). [Untitled]. Yiwu, China.

Yiwucore begins as a deliberate act of naming. This naming is not neutral; it is a speculative intervention that reclassifies efficiency, repetition, and standardisation as aesthetic forces. In doing so, *Yiwucore* foregrounds the infrastructural systems that organise contemporary life while remaining visually understated, and gestures toward the environmental and material consequences embedded within cycles of mass production and disposability (Fig.2). This ongoing reflection treats aestheticisation as both a tool and a critique: a way of making visible the atmospheres and residues of global commerce without claiming to resolve their contradictions.

To propose *Yiwucore* is therefore not simply to identify an existing aesthetic category, but to test what becomes visible when logistical infrastructure is read through aesthetic attention. The term functions less as a stable classification than as a speculative framing device: a way of noticing how repetition, circulation, categorisation and low-cost abundance begin to condition contemporary visual experience. The aesthetic does not belong exclusively to visual culture; it circulates with the everyday goods that quietly scaffold contemporary life without demanding much attention.

Reference: Appadurai, A. (1986) ‘Introduction: commodities and the politics of value’, in Appadurai, A. (ed.) *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 3–63. Easterling, K. (2014) *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space*. London: Verso. Hulme, A. (2015) ‘Bargain hunting in the “small-commodity city” of Yiwu, China’, *Métropolitiques*, 3 February. Available at: <https://metropolitiques.eu/Bargain-hunting-in-the-small-commodity-city-of-Yiwu-China.html>. Manovich, L. (2001) *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.