

## How to connect from afar in 2022

So often, the dominant tech platforms that offer 'connection' leave us feeling more numb and distracted than ever, passively wading through a constant feed of social updates. The quality of our personal relationships defaults to the whims of corporate algorithms working to churn attention into profitability. We want to stay in touch but lose each other amidst a sea of sedative noise.

Two years of pandemic distancing had set forth an abundance of virtual happenings that amplified remote exchanges while bypassing previously assumed barriers of disabilities and geographies. As lockdown policies shift, digital fatigue lingers, and physical happenings start to spring back, what happens to our dynamics of virtuality?

Social media is nothing new, of course. We have been prototyping communications technology since the dawn of time. History holds many ideas for how to send a message across distances, from carrier pigeons and postcards, to smoke signals and dream apparitions. Each of these communication protocols designs the sense, weight, and tone of a message, and the messages over time make up the wellbeing of an interpersonal relationship. A distanced relationship, then, is especially shaped by the protocols at play, with or without our intention.

How can we experiment within and beyond today's mainstream media platforms in order to establish remote connections that are rooted in intimacy and care?

In the 1:1 project, we seek a more active relationship with media technologies by taking cues from divination. Traditional tools like the Tarot, I Ching, or Sikh Ardas also involve approaching an 'algorithm' in search of tailored content. Yet such a process leaves room for agency: it's up to the subject to decide how they act upon or integrate the information they receive. Likewise in the context of 1:1, the wizard imparts some direction for further exploration with one's remote peer.

So much is acted out for us behind a social feed: the illusion of a 'stream' of information is aggregated by many APIs as computers constantly request and receive updates from each other. The packaging, routing, and compiling are in fact happening tangibly across the Earth. Might a dash of mysticism actually invite awareness if not agency into the actual process of call-and-response?

If we understand divination as the baseline combination of attention and intention, making the request may be the most important part. Inviting a brief suspension of disbelief, the wizard of 1:1 prefaces its protocol selection process by asking for the subject to bring their remote peer in mind, then to physically touch one hand on the heart and another to the screen. In the process of looking to establish a connection through the technology, the seeker necessarily establishes a connection with the technology itself.

There is a satirical aspect to questioning our dependence on technology in this way as well. Between human will and digital guidance, what comes first? Connectivity 'as a service' attempts to shortcut the linkage between effort and intimacy, but loses the magic along the way. What if it stopped just short of the task? Will we finally write a letter and mail it to a friend if a digital wizard tells us to?

## The Making of 1:1

As two friends currently living an ocean apart from each other, we decided to explore this question directly, by improvising a different connection protocol every day for 15 days. Each day, one of us would suggest a protocol by text message, and then we both try to stage a connection in that way.

open to sending and receiving (like we are servers!)

not limiting

... can be as broad as dissolving something in water ...

digital fatigue

performing that erosion?

excited to see you in different forms

At the end of this period, we reflected together by co-writing on an Etherpad.

our relationship has felt so easy in person.

connecting remotely should feel the same, no?

but there's tension.

receiving without giving.

consumption

the [ [network diagram](#) ] exercise got me feeling exhausted

and i really didnt wanna do it that day.

that was a lot of mental preparation definitely. i've been thinking about the 'labor of love' that is really the intention -> planning -> sometimes-hard-or-tiring logistics to make space for an offering.

it feels like we don't have a lot of time for this.

everyone is so busy.

## How did it feel to write the signals?

like turning a rock over in the stream  
or asking/promising little presents

a child coming up with a new game to play on the playground  
(how it will be received depends on the child's friends than the game itself)

improvising - a trust fall

I was nervous to ask for you to respond to an explicit ask for me. A demand.  
Asking for a signal is a signal.!

As we went along, the process got simpler.

## What does it mean to send or receive a signal?

When you are reminded to think of someone you love that's a nice warm feeling.

It's all just meditation isn't it. Choosing to meditate on someone.

My mom says this to me a lot. All that she's asking is to just be thought of.

When you think of someone, its the first signal you send to them.

ahh yes

All these signals start from putting someone into your mind.

So what I expect, is maybe to just think of me every once in a while :)

noticing and meeting each others' needs.

After these signals, I feel more ready to ask you  
to fulfill my needs, explicitly. :-) that makes me glad.  
i don't feel burdened by this FYI Why is that?  
What about these signals lead to this new comfort?

Perhaps the "muscle" we trained was one of simply showing up again and again and again.

surprises!

joy and poetry

***Which signals were your favorite? Which were most difficult?***

hmmmmmmmmmm perhaps there's a difference between favorite to send and favorite to receive

yeah if i know it's a fav of yours i would do it even if it felt like more of a ... hassle?  
:) thats really nice to hear. my favorite to receive was your voice. aw sweet. haha actually  
that was one that's hard for me yeah and there is such an intimacy in knowing whats hard for  
you, and seeing you do it for me anyway.

i feel like that was the time i felt the most guilty. because i took a while to send the  
voice messages. ideally i wanted to send them more often or in more creative ways or

no (: lol there's something fascinating going on here -- because like, i knew you  
were guilty (maybe cuz you said sorry a bunch) and there's something really sweet  
about you caring enough to feel bad to not do "your best" at this signal. :-)

i love our casual link exchange or image exchange. there's this fun buoyant jokester energy  
to it that always makes my day was that your favorite to receive? not necessarily but i  
appreciate the lightness of presence

with analog like mail it was nice to wait a few days  
and be able to hold the same material that you had held.

yes yes yes i loved that

***What else do you wish we could try or change?***

you know that virtual hug gif? it's so commonly sent  
but i wonder how we could do this in a really feel-ful and creative way

- give yourself a hug from me ok yes... maybe a secret handshake  
that we can find home with each other in.

SMELLS? how could we do smell. do you think smell is a portal that only opens when we are  
physically together?woah we could codify a moment with it

or even if you just go eat indian food.

i like the idea of you working to fill your space with a smell that is "mine"

\* mehfil means evening's gathering, but one filled with laughter love and music. for someone to host a mehfil is to hold and make space for communal love and attention.

Wow this immediately resonates. i know exactly the feeling

how does one [ [network diagram](#) ] a mehfil or is it like... hang out in a way we dont. exactly hang out in a way that is non-diagrammable

i've been reflecting on how somethings should not have a birds-eye view. w o w. like we don't need to be comprehensive or to map and account for everything. there's something controlling about that.

When we think of those that pass, we send them and us signals.

idk! yes! haha actually that's where the [ [ghost call](#) ] exercise came from. i was drawing from my grief practice - how i am learning to talk with my dad without a tangible confirmation in the immediate physical or digital space.

if we kept practicing, would we be able to feel the signal come through over time? even if we don't have a tangible confirmation. it's like a prayer.

my dad and grandma had this connection - if one was sick or in trouble the other would feel it

what about dreams?

- hold my memories in your mind (day dream of me)

# Bios

Alice Yuan Zhang 张元 is a Chinese-American media artist and educator. Her practice operates on cyclical and intergenerational time. Along the peripheries of imperialist imagination, she works to bridge ecology and technology through ancestral remembering, interspecies pedagogy, and translocal solidarity. [ [Website](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Mastodon](#) ]

soft networks is an exploratory design and development studio. We create slow, intimate, tools as a means of imagining alternate futures for social software. [ [Website](#) ]

