

Pando Suite

In July 2022, I made a series of audio recordings at the Pando aspen grove in south-central Utah. These included hydrophone recordings of Pando's root system, soundscapes of trembling leaves, choruses of birds, thunderstorms, and other elements of the environment. These recordings are featured in a multi-media installation exploring the interconnectedness of Pando's sound worlds, both hidden and overt.

With Pando, as with most aspens, what appears to be a sprawling forest is a single tree tied together at the roots. All the stands are genetically identical, and Pando is the largest such grove anywhere. By extension, at 106 acres in size, that makes Pando the world's largest tree, dwarfing the giant sequoia and most other living organisms to boot. It may also be the heaviest and oldest organism on earth. It has existed for an estimated 8-12 thousand years, roughly since the end of the last ice age.

As such, Pando challenges our basic understanding of the world. The idea that this giant forest could be a single organism defies our concept of the individual. Its vastness humbles our sense of space. At 8-12 thousand years old (give or take a million years) it is beyond our personal experience of time. There may be nothing more fundamental than the questions it forces upon us.

The exhibit explores some of those questions from the perspective of Pando's sounds. Its focal point is a resonant cube made of aspen wood that emanates with a low, drone-like rumble. The sound was captured by placing a hydrophone in contact with Pando's root system. The recording was made during a summer thunderstorm and represents perhaps millions of aspen leaves trembling in the wind, passing their vibrations through the tree and into the earth.

As the drone plays, speakers overhead play ambient sounds of Pando's leaves and other soundscapes. These contrasting yet connected recordings illustrate the multidimensional connectedness of Pando itself. The use of natural soundscapes — recordings that capture the complex interweaving of sounds in the environment — further brings home the interconnectedness of natural systems.

--Jeff Rice

Acknowledgements

Some of the sounds for this exhibit were recorded during a 2022 artist residency with the non-profit group Friends of Pando. Other sounds were recorded as part of a commission from *The New York Times Magazine*. The resonating aspen cube was fabricated by Bob Huskey of Saturn Design. Special thanks to Lance Oditt for showing me several recording locations within the Pando grove, including the mysterious "portal to Pando," where I was able to capture the sound of Pando's roots. Without his assistance, that recording would not have been possible.

Artist's statement

I work primarily with field recordings, and I am interested in sounds generated by plants, animals, and natural systems. I often record these sounds for use in museum exhibits and interactive electronic music. My audio works have featured the wingbeats of moths, the collisions of cosmic rays, natural radio frequencies, and the roots of trees, all of which explore the importance of cause-and-effect and the fundamental connection between sound sources and their sounds. By exploring where a sound begins and where it ends (or doesn't), I try to examine questions of interconnectedness, identity, and perception. In these works, ecological boundaries blur, quantum boundaries blur, and human divisions blur. This is further expressed when recorded sounds are played in different spaces. Placing natural sounds in new contexts such as art galleries and other venues creates new connections that link seemingly disparate places and ideas.

About the artist

Jeff Rice is a Seattle-based sound artist with a long-standing interest in natural soundscapes. He has produced multimedia for museums, television, film, and theater, and his work as a field recordist has been featured in media outlets ranging from National Public Radio to *Outside Magazine* and *The Los Angeles Times*. In 2018, his recordings of the Pando aspen grove appeared in *The New York Times Magazine's* Ellie Award-winning issue "Listen to the World." He is the co-founder of the Acoustic Atlas at Montana State University where he curates a collection of thousands of natural sound recordings from around the Western United States. More information about his work is available at ecosystemsound.com.