



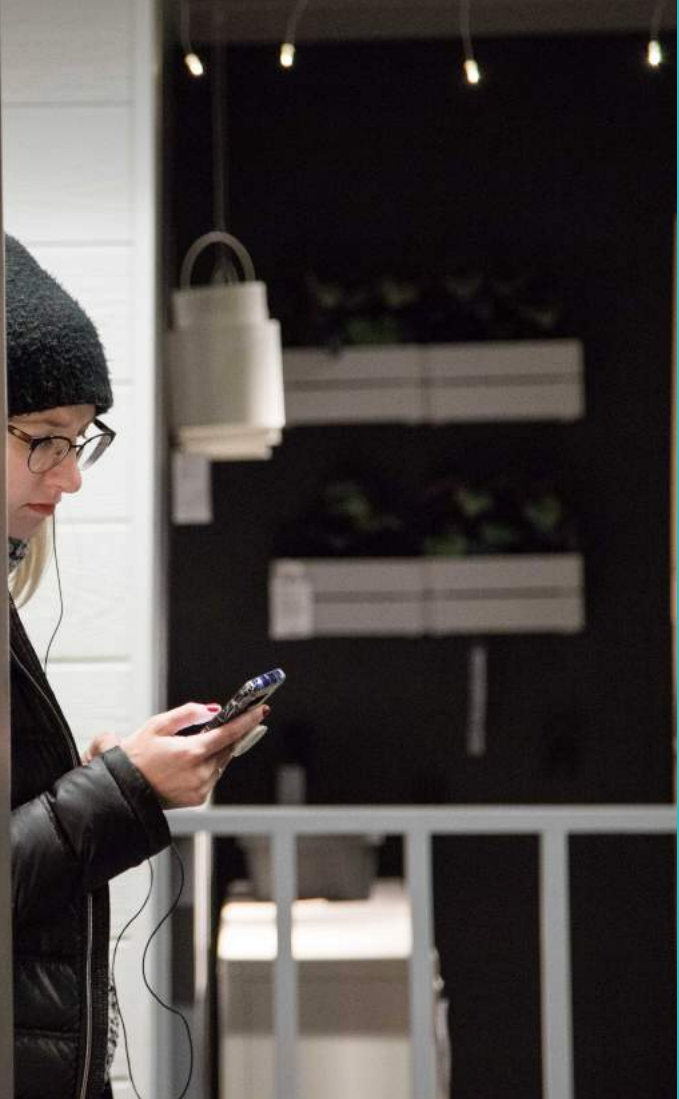
# ASSEMBLE

SUPPORTING  
DOCUMENTS



[www.projectassemble.org](http://www.projectassemble.org)

a playful, tasteful,  
and profound  
invitation to take a  
look behind the  
cardboard facade  
of the catalog-  
ready dreams  
imposed on us by  
brands.....



It is a brilliant idea to  
build Assemble on top  
of existing  
infrastructure, by re-  
thinking and re-  
appropriating the  
context of a store like  
IKEA.....

...underlines its political  
agenda to criticize  
consumerism and  
patriarchy.

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Choose one.



Follow her to the  
bathroom, press your  
hands to the shower door  
and close your eyes.

I'm in the  
shower.

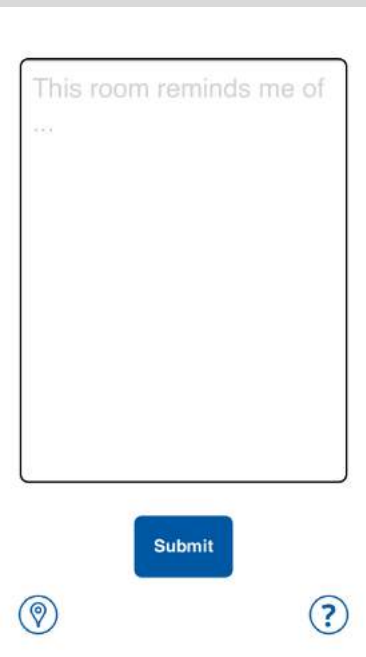


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Worldwide ▸ North America ▸ United States ▸ New York State ▸ New York ▸ An interactive performance is secretly taking place inside this famous furniture store

News / Art

## An interactive performance is secretly taking place inside this famous furniture store

By Howard Halle

Posted: Friday January 24 2020, 5:30pm



Photograph: Shutterstock

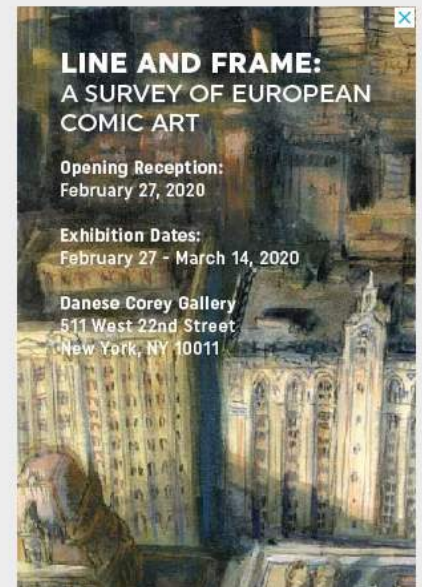
When you hear the phrase “**assembly required**” and “meatballs” in the same sentence, which global furniture chain do you immediately think off? Wait, don’t say the name! That would spoil the fun behind a piece of guerrilla theater that’s currently having its run inside everyone’s favorite **Red Hook** retailer where the stuff has funny, Scandinavian names.

Conceived as part of the Exponential Festival in **Brooklyn**, “Assemble,” as the work is called, involves a smartphone app that takes you to the aforementioned establishment, whose name is never mentioned. There, you move through various floor displays of bedroom, living room, bathroom or kitchen decor as you listen over headphones to a story being relayed by a character named Jane.

Having just turned 40, Jane reflects on her mid-life crises through a narrative that shifts according to where you are in the store. As you move about, Jane’s recollections of various memories, fantasies and fuck-ups are prompted by your interactions with the space and the items therein.

Assemble creates drama out of the otherwise exhausting tedium of dealing with *Ik—er, the store’s*—contention that navigating twisting, never-ending aisles of easily breakable shit constituents a satisfying shopping experience.

Your destination is disclosed when you **buy tickets**, and an access code to download the app is provided once you get there. The show runs every 15 minutes from 5pm to 7pm, Thursday to Monday, through February 2. Don’t forget to try the meatballs.



### LINE AND FRAME: A SURVEY OF EUROPEAN COMIC ART

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Photo courtesy Assemble

## Guerrilla Audio Experience Lets You ‘Assemble’ Your American Dream (Review)

A walk through a retail store becomes a meditation on life



Asya Gorovits [Follow](#)

Jan 26 · 6 min read

(Note: *Assemble* is an unauthorized immersive performance; we were asked to not reveal the secret location before the last week of the New York City run. If you don't want any spoilers, do refrain from reading the second half of this review).

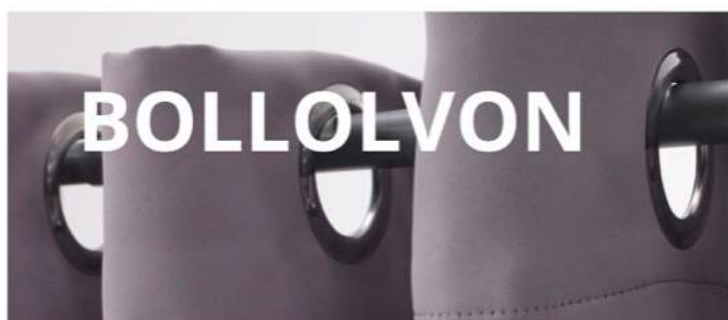


Are you truly happy with your life? Do you look back with no regret at all about the choices you've made? Do you feel certain about the direction in which your life is headed?

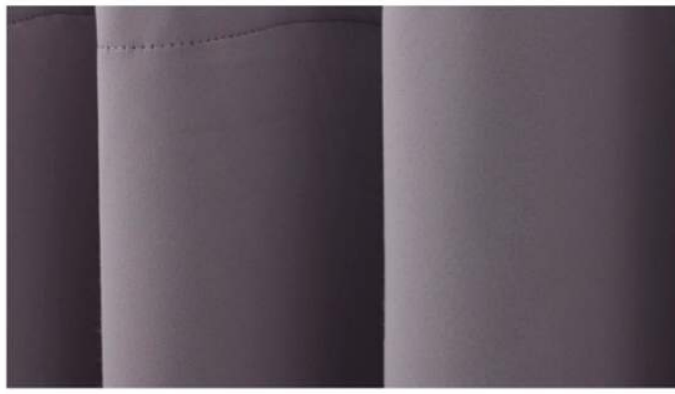
If you had to pause even for a moment to think about these questions, chances are you will enjoy *Assemble*, a guerilla site-specific audio performance, currently running in Brooklyn as a part of the Exponential Festival. If you found yourself slowly spiraling into an existential crisis by answering those questions, you are already halfway to getting into the mindset of Jane, the character through whose eyes *Assemble* is experienced.

Jane is a New Yorker turning forty and, as many of us do around milestone anniversaries, she is assessing her life. The way that she does it is rather unconventional. With the help of an AI assistant, she navigates a famous big box store, revisiting her memories and dreams. The audience members are invited to tag along, to reflect on their own life and to walk in Jane's shoes for a part of the way. *What does it mean to be a woman in a megapolis approaching forty? What are the choices laid out in front of her? And when she makes a choice, is it a manifestation of her true self or a mixture of cultural expectations and the influence of brand marketing?* In a way, we all ask ourselves these questions at some point, which is why it's so easy to relate to Jane.

## Choose one.







The *Assemble* experience is provided via a smartphone app (developed by David Blackman) downloaded onto one's phone. A series of short audio tracks take the listener

through various locations in the store, occasionally throwing in narrative “forks”: by clicking on a picture of an object on your screen, you can choose your own adventure. You might be asked to record a voice memo, write something down, take a photo, or draw a picture. There are some tasks involving interacting with the store environment and manipulating objects on display. I felt somewhat uneasy performing the latter. Although the tasks weren’t asking for anything that might be too embarrassing, as soon as they went outside the lines of normal behavior expected from customers, I found myself hesitating if there was a staff member visible.

Prior to entering the store, I listen to the audio waiver, informing me that *Assemble* wasn’t exactly authorized by the store, but it wasn’t exactly forbidden, either. I am warned that if at any point in my experience, I am approached by a staff member and they ask what I am doing, it’s best to say I am conducting research.

Feeling a little bit like a spy trespassing on enemy territory, I feel especially wary of my appearance and my behavior. My brain is in full “panopticon” mode when it is time to perform a “strange” action. But this mode I’m in only makes the moments of quiet listening that much sweeter because I know The Big Brother is unable to hear what’s in my headphones, unable to enter Jane’s thoughts, and, therefore, unable share our experience.

Besides her name and her age, I don’t get many facts about Jane. There is enough here to get an idea of what she is like. But at the same time, writers Talya Chalef and Jess Kauffman leave enough gaps so that I can fill in the blank parts with my own thoughts and experiences, making Jane feel very relatable. When the app prompts me to reflect on something, I sometimes hear Jane’s thoughts in my headphones, but sometimes space is left for my own reflections. Other people and noises enter the mosaic soundscape during *Assemble*, the density of which varies greatly. There are times when our AI guide is practically attacking me with questions and tasks, while there are also quiet, meditative moments.

*(Spoilers regarding the exact location of the experience follow.)*

The AI guide in the app who directs me through the experience is named Sigrid. Using her cheery voice with a Scandinavian accent, she takes me through the IKEA showroom in Red Hook. Somewhere in between a shopping assistant and a life coach, Sigrid is here



to entertain, educate, and sell various scenarios of a perfect life (which, of course, can be obtained through buying goods from IKEA).



My journey goes through fully assembled and decorated rooms with names like “The home is where the heart is” and “A passion for things.” As I lie on the beds, pull out drawers, and sit at tables, I imagine myself living in similar life-sized doll houses, the kind which are neatly designed for small city apartments. Audio scenes bring the mock apartments alive, but, at the same time, these scenes make them feel sad and hollow, like the artificial plants used for decorating these rooms. I stand in the middle of a housewarming party where the host, Pete, brags about his kitchen appliances. In another scene, I hear a confused dad reading instructions aloud on how to insert a tampon. I lay down on a bed and, as I start giving into the calming music, I hear the snoring of an invisible person next to me. The same way as I “try on” a STJÄRNTULPAN duvet cover or try sitting in a ÖRFJÄLL chair, I try on roles of a bohemian New Yorker, a parent, and a spouse.

An IKEA store organically lends itself to a “dark ride”-like narrative with a predetermined route charted through various “sets.” It already feels like a life-sized version of The Game of Life with arrows on the floor pointing towards your next destination: workspace; kitchen; nursery. It is a brilliant idea to build *Assemble* on top of existing infrastructure, by re-thinking and re-appropriating the context of a store like IKEA. The fact that the immersive production is operating in complete secrecy from the venue underlines its political agenda to criticize consumerism and patriarchy. *Assemble* also tackles another interesting topic, namely how the arts serve commerce. In a way, it is an “immersive brand de-activation” despite having no direct attacks on IKEA in its content.

*Assemble* is a playful, tasteful, and profound invitation to take a look behind the cardboard facade of the catalog-ready dreams imposed on us by brands. It is a straightforward and unapologetic criticism of the modern, super-achiever culture that demands “high performance” in everything: career, marriage, raising offspring, and decorating your apartment. But this criticism is brought to the participant’s ears as a “contraband” — a lot of these insights only hit me later on. *Assemble* is never aggressive or accusatory; somehow, the show manages to be fun and relaxing but also raises some serious questions at the same time.





Weird Art

# ASSEMBLY REQUIRED: EXCITING NEW SHOW TURNS A FURNITURE STORE INTO A STAGE



By Ben Verde

Posted on January 23, 2020



Active sitting: "Assemble" requires its participants to interact with some of the objects in the furniture store.

Photo by Talya Chalef

This show has a lot in store!

A bizarre and exciting new immersive theater show sent me creeping through a waterfront furniture store early this week, seeking drama and romantic tension somewhere between the curtains and the bookshelves. The experience transformed the familiar space of the home goods retailer — a space where I had every right to be — into a secret stage for an epic exploration of choice.

“Assemble,” running as part of the Exponential Festival, is a “choose your own adventure” style experience delivered through a smartphone app. After buying a ticket for Monday night at 6:45 pm, I was given a secret address in Red Hook. There I was given an app access code, put on my headphones, and was ushered, along



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## UPCOMING EVENTS

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Thu, Jan. 23

Hello Panda Festival



with a pair of other participants, to the store in question.

The app delivers instructions and a story directly to your ears, telling you where to go inside the store. As you travel through the maze-like furniture retailer, you hear the story of Jane, a woman who has just turned 40, as she reflects on her life. Stop in a particular room, and the app urges you to choose an item there. Do you step into the bathtub? Sit on the rug? Turn on a lamp? Each choice triggers a different scenario in Jane's memory or her imagination, along with — literally — a new path for the narrative.

Wandering through the faux-domestic showrooms, I heard Jane's memories of parties, hookups, and breakups. Other rooms acted as portals to her fantasies, where I could eavesdrop on intimate, imaginary moments. And at every turn, I was forced to make choices, without knowing how it could affect the story — just as in life, when we have no idea the impact our responses will have on our futures.

The audio turns the otherwise sterile location into an impressive storytelling device, and Jane's story of middle-aged aimlessness will sound familiar to anyone who has ever felt like their life is going nowhere. Her nervousness was echoed by my own — I felt conspicuous, wandering around the store with my headphones on, the only person there not picking out a bedroom set with a partner. Store employees have no idea the performance is taking place, and they likely do not care, but I still felt like an outsider, sneaking around the store like a freak.

The entire experience takes around 75 minutes, most of it spent walking around a cavernous box store. "Assemble" can be exhausting for the legs, but it thrills the ears with a convincing and absorbing narrative.

*"Assemble" at an undisclosed location in Red Hook (revealed after ticket purchase at [www.projectassemble.org](http://www.projectassemble.org)). Thu–Mon through Feb. 2; every 15 minutes from 5–7 pm. \$20.*



Thu, Jan. 23

### Exploring NYC's Streetscape



Thu, Jan. 23

### Widow Jane Cocktail Class



Thu, Jan. 23

### The Good Dog Show

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THEATER

The New York Times

Mrs. Doubtfire

A New Musical Puppets

Broadway previews begin

March 9

Get Tickets

17 Plays and Musicals to Go to in N.Y.C. This Weekend

by Alexis Solis

Jan. 2, 2020

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Our guide to plays and musicals coming to New York stages and a few last-chance picks of shows that are about to close. Our reviews of open shows are at [nytimes.com/reviews/theater](https://www.nytimes.com/reviews/theater).

### Previews & Openings

**THE EXPONENTIAL FESTIVAL** at various locations (performances run through Feb. 2). This [monthlong festival](#) lauding local artists returns to Brooklyn. Participating locations this year will include the Brick, JACK, the Doxsee Theater and Vital Joint, as well as a superstore that will play host, wittingly or otherwise, to an immersive, choose-your-own-adventure show. [theexponentialfestival.org](https://theexponentialfestival.org)

FILM FESTIVAL

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ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

## The Best Things To Do In NYC This Week, A Mostly-NYE Edition

BY ORIANA LECKERT

DEC. 30, 2019 2:59 P.M. • 10 COMMENTS

**Exponential Festival @ Various venues**

See the bleeding edge of theater at the [Exponential Festival](#), a month-long extravaganza focused on emerging artists and experimental performance. Some highlights: [Good and Noble Beings](#), an adaptation of Deleuze and Guattari's poststructuralist text *A Thousand Plateaus* mashed up with memoir and radical reimaginings; [Devotion Devotion](#), opulent loops and choreography made from deconstructed memories and cinematic debris; [Assemble](#), an app-based, choose-your-own-adventure guerilla performance; [Fear in the Western World](#), a high-tech digital puppet show combining horror movie tropes with Greek mythology; and [Protagony](#), mixing high school debate with drag to create "oratory theatricality" with a different cast each night. Whew.

Opens Friday, January 3rd // Various venues // [Various prices](#)

art ying

pop culture and everyday life New York

THEATER/FESTIVALS

16. [Go to The Exponential Festival](#)

A fringe experience.

Various locations, through February 3.

The deep fringe of New York theater-making gets its Brooklyn showcase in this far-flung festival, which contains radical dance double bills at Parallel, a vital smorgasbord evening (on the 25th), an immersive choose-your-own-adventure show in an actual (and secret) box store, a noir-sci-fi thriller at the Doxsee Theater in Sunset Park, and a solemn solo piece by Kareem Lucas, in which he stages his own funeral at the Brick. If you've ever felt the wild pioneering days of the theater scene were over, these impassioned, experimental artists will make you clutch your pearls again.

H.S.

So, David Edelstein Which Oscar-Nominated Documentaries Are Worth Streaming

Our movie critic on 2019's top and some major Oscar contenders

"THE VERY BEST IS the cautious quasi-comedy *American* also the first film to carry the seal of approval vis-à-vis the lix deal. The transporting *It* (Hulu) centers on a rough-hewn woman who presides over a fi system of bees in an isolated M valley. The wrenching Syrian *For Sama* can be viewed via its *Frontline*, at pbs.org. *Apollo*, which is not nominated, is i

EVENTS

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EVENT ROUNDUPS

## The 10 best cheap things to do this week, generous laughs edition

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by [Alix Piorun](#) Jan 13, 2020

7. Join Jane at [Project Assemble](#), a guerrilla, choose-your-own-adventure performance that transforms the mundane spaces of a well-known store in Brooklyn into a series of worlds, fantasies and meditations. (Thurs-Sun, Red Hook, \$15-20)

# Assemble: Interview with Director Talya Chalef

By **Meagan J. Meehan** - January 9, 2020



*"Assemble" is a forthcoming work of immersive theater by The Assemble Project that was conceived and directed by Talya Chalef.*

[Subscribe to this Author](#)

"Assemble" is a forthcoming work of immersive theater by The Assemble Project. Conceived and directed by Talya Chalef, this limited engagement runs January 16 – February 2 at a Secret Brooklyn Location revealed to guests after their ticket purchase. It is presented as part of the Exponential Festival.

"Assemble" follows a 40-year-old woman named Jane as she navigates life. Described as a guerrilla, choose-your-own-adventure performance that transforms the mundane spaces of a store in Brooklyn into a series of worlds, fantasies and meditations, the show encourages participants download an app to their phones and are prompted to navigate and interact with the store through a series of choices and tasks. The resulting experience is part immersive theatre, part audio tour and an entirely unique experience for each person.

Recently director Talya Chalef discussed this project and the processes behind it via an exclusive interview.



**Meagan Meehan (MM):** How did you discover your love for the arts and why do you gravitate towards the theater?

**Talya Chalef (TC):** I was that drama kid who played dress ups from a very young age and auditioned for every play/musical in school. I don't know if there was ever a time when I wasn't in the theatre or insisting on taking more dance/singing/drama classes. It was my happy place and still is.

**MM:** What experiences do you most draw your inspiration from creatively?

**TC:** My family's migration story: my dad's parents were survivors in WW2, so I think a lot about intergenerational memory. I also grew up in South Africa as Apartheid fell, so I think I've internalised the idea that change is possible. And as an adult, I've come to question my own inherited biases and prejudices from living within that absurd bubble. Lastly, my experience as a kid within a progressive Jewish youth group taught me the value of participatory processes, community and immersive learning.

**MM:** How did you come up with the concept for "Assemble" and why did you decide to make the lead character specifically forty years old?

**TC:** I've had the form of the idea for a while. Creating immersive audio stories within this particular store seemed like a no brainer. (Can't disclose store!) And I recently turned forty and had my own mid-life questioning, which clearly influenced the thematic direction of the work!

**MM:** What were the challenges of getting this staged?

**TC:** We're doing this guerilla style and lending much of the work to the existing objects and layout of the store. We have no idea if they'll change anything on us. And it's a constant source of anxiety that we may arrive at a location that no longer exists! This actually happened right after our November creative development.

**MM:** How many different storyline "options" are there for visitors?



**TC:** Approximately 13 or 14 different experiences with choices within those.

*"Assemble" will be performed in Brooklyn, New York.*

**MM:** What are some of the more outlandish rooms/areas?

**TC:** Without giving too much away, there are moments where we ask participants to get into bathtubs to experience a little private moment.

**MM:** What's your favorite segment of the show and why?

**TC:** Close to the ending where our protagonist Jane starts to question what's come before and speak out.

**MM:** What do you hope audiences take away from the performance?

**TC:** A fun playful and at times poignant experience that in moments makes them think about the choices they make in their own life and the personal or societal costs associated.

**MM:** What are your ultimate career goals?

**TC:** Being paid/commissioned to continue making new projects with fantastic collaborators while presenting them in spaces across the US and internationally. Aka, what I'm doing but being paid far more!

**MM:** What projects are coming up for you soon and what topics would you like to address artistically in the future?

**TC:** I've written a pilot for an original TV show with a buddy of mine and we're working on sending that around. And I'll likely take a visit to Cape Town sometime this year to scope out a project I'd like to do there. Other than that, hopefully we can get some interest from festivals abroad to present Assemble. This is the most tour-able show I've ever created.

**MM:** Is there anything else that you would like to mention?

**TC:** Let's be kind to one another and ourselves. The world needs a little more love and a little less anger and noise.