Are IKEA Instructions Comics?

Writing prompt prepared by Aaron Kashtan, Visiting Assistant Professor at Miami University.
This mini-lesson could take 10-90 minutes depending on how the professor wants to approach it.

Dr. Aaron Kashtan posted the following comment in Facebook setting off a lively discussion.

Although Kashtan believes that IKEA instructions are comics, some of his respondents disagreed and others took a position somewhere in the middle. During the discussion, individuals cited specific examples that helped set the question in a socio-historical context.

As the discussion continued, Kashtan posted a revised question.

From the Facebook Discussion

Pól Rua Yup commented that "Will Eisner used to do instructional comics during WWII on things like weapon maintenance. That's pretty much the same thing." Catherine Yronwode and Zack Kruse agreed. Yronwode: "Yes, they are instructional comics. See Will Eisner's "How to Use a Grease Gun" for the first example of an instructional comic. He invented the genre in the 1940s." Kruse: "They're no less comics than Eisner's military manuals."
Jeff Brady raised the question, "It's sequential art, no doubt. But is it juxtaposed with text?" Pól Rua responded, "Does that mean that Greg Kuper's wordless comics, or 'Gon' aren't comics?" Jeff Brady replied, "I wouldn't NOT call them comics, but I wouldn't argue that they aren't."

Peter J. Biancani observed "I don't usually feel stupid and inept after reading comics...well, maybe some of Allen Moore's comics. I could not get into "From Hell" to save my life; I would have preferred IKEA instructions."

Jordana Greenblatt wrote that "I went to a really interesting presentation at a comics conference once on instructional diagrams, including Ikea's."

Jeff McLaughlin explained that comics "gotta have a blending of words and images."

Mark Newgarden agreed that IKEA instructions are comics, "Just not very good ones."

**Variations on the IKEA Prompt**

Franny Howes has her students read and discuss IKEA instructions when she asks her technical writing students to draw instructional comics.

Tess Neiheisel Evans incorporates IKEA instructions in her technical writing courses. "They always come up with my tech writing students as the worst—meant to be helpful to all, but usually helpful to none."

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