

Creating an inventory numbering system

The Joan Mitchell Foundation worked with the CALL Artists to develop this inventory numbering system. This system is in alternating alphanumeric code that displays basic info about the artwork and connects it to a database or other means of record keeping, for instance, a spreadsheet or notebook.

The inventory number or code would look like this: **NS14PR003**.

- **NS** represents the artist's initials, in this case, Neal Smith.
- **14** is the year of creation, which is 2014.
- **PR** is the artist's chosen code for the general type of art, in this case, printmaking.
- **003** is the artwork number.

Essentially, NS14PR003 tells the artist that this is the 3rd print created or documented in the year 2014.

Some of the advantages of using this system:

1. The arrangement of alternating letters and numbers are easy to quickly read, write, memorize and enter into a database management system.
2. Computers don't like long file names, so using this system for folder management is excellent.
3. There are no periods, slashes or other offending characters for computers that take up unnecessary space, and are difficult to write on the back of delicate work. For example, periods are known to puncture to make their point.
4. There is no information that would most likely change in the future. For instance, the artwork's location or whether the artwork is framed shouldn't be included in the inventory numbering system.

Examining the code:

NS: The first two letters are not imperative, but they give identity to the work and the artist. For instance, if you have a collection of other artist's work, you may decide to catalog their work as well, so you would use their initials.

14: These two numbers won't distinguish 2014 from 1914, but this system is for you in your lifetime, thus there is no overlap unless you've been making artwork for over 100 years.

PR: This letter code describes the medium category. Rather than describing types of paintings or prints, like Monotype or Acrylic, just use Painting, Print or Sculpture. Try using PR for Print, DW for Drawing. You can use any two-letter system you decide upon.

003: These numbers will specifically describe which painting or print for a particular year. For instance, you will have a 003 for every medium category in every year. Three numbers will give you 999 artworks per medium, per year. Some artists are more prolific than others, so you may need four numbers, like 0003. This number doesn't

have to describe which artwork came first in a given year, only that the artwork is unique.

Editioned artworks like prints, glass castings, or bronzes aren't considered differently either. Each work in an edition will have its own unique number. Consider that NS14PR003 and NS14PR004 are two prints of the same edition. This means NS14PR003 can be tracked as owned by a collector, and NS14PR004 is tracked as owned by a museum, even though they were created as seemingly identical works of an edition.

Now you can use this inventory number to find the title, specific medium, size and provenance of any work simply by searching your database, spreadsheet or other record-keeping system.

Keep in mind while museums and galleries may use meaningless inventory tracking systems for security, an artist needs immediate visual recognition. Your job is difficult enough managing your career. This inventory numbering system is simple, concise and easy to use. It doesn't give you all the information about the artwork, but it gives you enough and is easier to read than a bar code.