

Calibrating the Richter Scale

IN OCTOBER 2011, when Gerhard Richter's *Kerze*, 1982, reached £10.5 million (\$16.4 million) at Christie's London, the painter declared, "It's just as absurd as the banking crisis. It's impossible to understand, and it's daft." The artist's opinion notwithstanding, that price was exceeded 10 times in the following months. And this past October, after years of steadily climbing auction records, one of Richter's abstract paintings commanded the highest price ever for a work by a living artist—£21.3 million (\$34.2 million)—at a Sotheby's auction in London. Moreover, Richter's market success compares favorably even to that of dead superstars: While works by Picasso posted three auction sales in 2012 that topped \$15 million, Richter artworks generated eight over the same time period. Measured by total turnover in U.S. dollars, Richter is now the world's eighth most valuable artist of all time. For the charts on these pages, we looked at a total of 927 auction results over the 20-year period from 1993 to 2012, based on data in the Blouin Art Sales Index (BASI). Taken together, these results amount to \$892.7 million. Richter's works at auction in 2012 fetched \$200 million according to BASI, more than the works of any other living artist, and more than the auction totals in the same year for Claude Monet, Alberto Giacometti, and Mark Rothko combined. As of 2012, no fewer than 540 individual Richters had sold at auction for more than \$100,000; 23 exceeded \$10 million between 2007 and 2012 alone. **BY ROMAN KRAEUSSEL**

ALL IMAGES: CHRISTIE'S; OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT: CHRISTIE'S; SOTHEBY'S; CHRISTIE'S; SOTHEBY'S

GERHARD RICHTER RECORDS THROUGH THE YEARS

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Below, a look at the works that at some time claimed title as the most expensive Richter painting. Almost all periods and styles in his artistic career have found favor in the market from



\$2.5m

MARCH 1998
Seestück
1969
CHRISTIE'S
New York

This work, from a series of depictions of choppy ocean waves, was the first Richter to surpass the million-dollar mark at auction.



\$3.3m

DECEMBER 1998
Domplatz Mailand
1968
SOTHEBY'S
London

\$4.9m

NOVEMBER 2000
Der Kongress, Professor Zander
1965
CHRISTIE'S
New York

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\$5.4m

MAY 2001
Drei Kerzen
1982
SOTHEBY'S
New York

The candle paintings, dating from the early 1980s, are rare: Richter painted only about 20 of them. *Drei Kerzen* was sold three months after his 2001 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York.



\$5.5m

MAY 2007
Abstraktes Bild (770)
1992
CHRISTIE'S
New York

\$11.2m

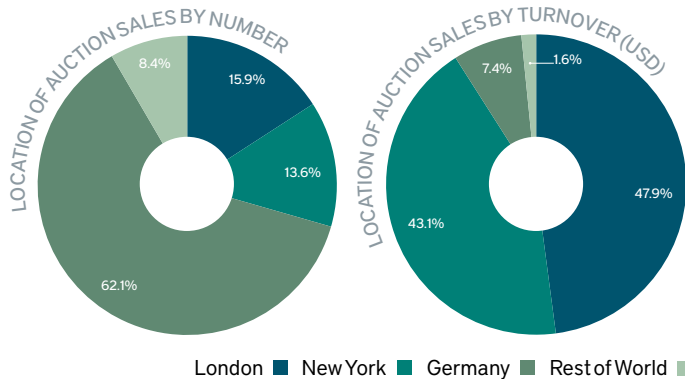
NOVEMBER 2007
Düsenjäger
1963
CHRISTIE'S
New York

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The first artwork to fetch eight figures, *Düsenjäger* was painted at the height of the Cold War and is one in a series of eight aircraft photo paintings.

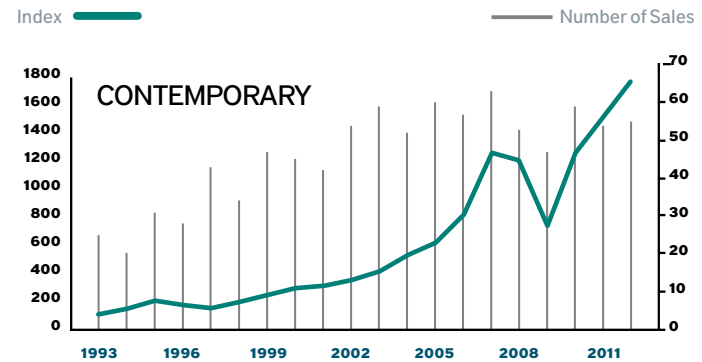
VOLUME VS. VALUE BY SALE LOCATION

German collectors see their compatriot's best works sold in London and New York at Sotheby's and Christie's. More than 90 percent of Richter's total turnover of \$892.7 million came from the main auction hubs of the U.S. and the U.K., though those sales represented just 30 percent of his transactions by volume. More than 60 percent of his 927 transactions over the period 1993–2012 took place in Germany, but they mostly involved prints, drawings, and modest paintings. For instance, although his *Kerze* ("Candle") canvases were still sold in significant numbers in Germany in the 1990s, since the early 2000s nearly all such paintings found new homes through sales in London and New York.



THE RICHTER INDEX

The frenzy can also be seen in Richter's index, which saw a nearly fivefold increase over the last decade, and 250 percent over just the past three years. His prices and his records took off after 2009 despite the broader financial crisis and the ensuing correction in the contemporary art market. As the index shows, \$100 invested in 1993 in a Richter artwork would be worth an average of \$1,787 today. While historical returns are no guarantee of future results, Richter looks like a solid investment. Of his 119 artworks that realized more than \$1 million, 23 were repeat sales, meaning that one out of every five million-dollar artworks had a prior auction history.



his photo paintings of people, jets, skulls, and candles to seascapes and townscapes to the towering abstract paintings that have propelled his market to new heights in recent years.

\$14.3m

FEBRUARY 2008
Zwei Liebespaare
1966
CHRISTIE'S
London

In February 2008 Christie's London set a record for one of Richter's 1960s "capitalist realism" pictures when the house sold *Zwei Liebespaare*.

\$15.7m

FEBRUARY 2008
Kerze
1983
SOTHEBY'S
London

Just after that record was set, *Kerze* brought triple the high estimate, lighting the way to \$15.7 million.

\$16.4m

OCTOBER 2011
Kerze
1982
CHRISTIE'S
London

\$20.8m

NOVEMBER 2011
Abstraktes Bild
1997
SOTHEBY'S
New York

After the long pause following the financial crisis, *Abstraktes Bild* (849-3), 1997—estimated at \$9 million to \$12 million—achieved a new record in 2011 when it sold for \$20.8 million to Lily Safra, who donated it to the Israel Museum soon after.

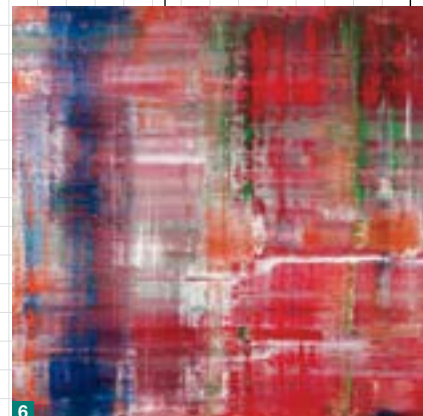
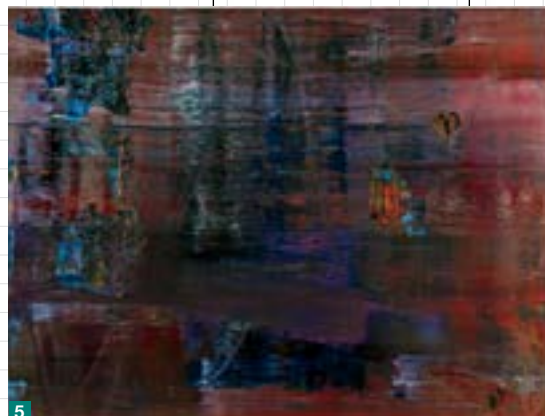
\$21.8m

MAY 2012
Abstraktes Bild
(798-3)
1993
CHRISTIE'S
New York

\$34.2m

OCTOBER 2012
Abstraktes Bild
(809-4)
1994
SOTHEBY'S
London

When sold at auction from guitarist Eric Clapton's collection, *Abstraktes Bild* (809-4), 1994, earned Richter the title of most expensive living artist, displacing Jasper Johns, whose *Flag*, 1960–66, had sold for \$28.6 million at Christie's New York in May 2010.



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