At a time when each world event seems more depressing than the last (with the possible exception of the victory in France of Emmanuel Macron, on whom the jury must still be out), it’s refreshing to find an initiative founded on optimism and renewal. *Anew* is a travelling exhibition bringing together stories of turning points in the lives of ordinary (and extraordinary) people. These are presented in the form of a short text accompanied by an object symbolising the occasion of the change of direction.

In the first three-stage show in Venice, just concluded, the objects included, a boiled egg, a statuette of Ganesha (the elephant-headed god of, among other things, new beginnings), a *Corriere della Sera* from 1949, a Carlo Scarpa sketch of a flight of stairs, a yellow New York taxi (in miniature) and a broken bicycle wheel perched on a three-volume *Divina Commedia*.
The show is the brainchild of Manuela Cattaneo della Volta, an adoptive Venetian who moved ten years ago from gloomy Milan to a luminous eyrie 91 sheer steps up from a sidestreet near La Fenice.

The obvious question to ask her, when I’ve got my breath back, is:
What gave you the idea?
Everything begins with an ending! It was all thanks to a holiday with friends, where we justified having an idle time on the beach in Croatia with a bit of culture by making a trip to Zagreb, where we stumbled across the Museum of Broken Relationships, and were all unexpectedly enthralled by a hundred separation stories – romantic ones, obviously, but also father-and-son, mother-and-children, siblings, wars and disasters, you name it . . .

A pinch of my innate optimism did the rest: why not tell the story of beginnings, instead of endings? It wouldn’t matter if the story didn’t turn out to be forever: it would still have begun, and in some specially memorable way. The idea was to home in on that moment and ask yourself: Couldn’t the same happen to me? – or even be able to say: Hey, the same thing did happen to me!
And you’d find this out, reading other people’s stories.
And how did this become your own story?
The next months, September through December, were spent mulling it all over and thinking about how to take the project forward (with a little help from my dear and long-suffering friends, who had to put up with tea and biscuits and brainstorming at least once a week), while I work out I need to start softly, softly – no museum, but maybe an exhibition: where, though, and how?
Eventually, in February, at an art event, I ran into Anita, who has an exhibition space, ARTI, near the Palazzo Grassi in Venice: we got on, arranged to meet again. She told me about herself and I talked about me, and about Anew. She liked the idea, and I liked her gallery. We’re on? Almost.
Anita Cerpelloni’s diary was just about full throughout 2017. By cutting a bit here, squeezing a bit there, we found three separate weeks in May and June when we could give the idea a go. Three jigsaw pieces to fit into her space yards from the Palazzo Grassi with the Biennale looming. It wasn’t a moment for dithering.
And so?
We chopped and changed – literally; but that was later.
I had March and April to collect stories from all over the world. I asked friends, and friends of friends of friends. The plan was to cover every corner of the globe, and collect as many different types of story as possible.
An ambitious enough project . . .
Well, yes – especially given the time available. It was certainly a challenge. But I believed in the idea and luckily had a good long list of contacts to start from. In two months I had stories from India, South Africa, Japan, the US, of every shape and size, and covering the main themes: spirituality, sharp changes of lifestyle, love and friendship and family, switching cities and countries and jobs. There are still some lacunae. There’s a good mix of the sexes – and sexualities
- but all the authors so far are white, and the great contemporary theme of forced emigration has not been touched on – yet. But I couldn’t complain that in two months I’d collected 42 stories and 42 objects to go with them, and – together with Anita – produced a handsome catalogue and a bit of merchandising (postcards, fridge magnets – no T-shirt!) in time (just) for the first event.

There were three, is that right? When exactly did the first Anew show open its doors?

At the beginning of May, just before the Biennale inauguration, at Anita’s ARTI gallery, right by the Palazzo Grassi, where a huge Damien Hirst exhibition had opened in April. Friends came along, obviously, and we shared a celebratory glass, courtesy of our generous sponsor Verona Gusto, but right away curious strangers, Italian and foreign, dropped in. We discovered that a boiled egg in a gallery window attracts attention! But a bicycle wheel with broken spokes and a mini yellow taxi flown in from New York had an effect too. The next instalment was hallway through May, and a last one towards the end of June, just in time to catch any remaining Venetians before they went off on their summer holidays.
Boiled eggs and bicycle wheels? Those must be the symbolic objects I imagine?
Yes, that was the fun part. In perhaps the majority of cases I had to help the writers out in finding the right object to symbolise their new beginning. And sometimes they were reluctant to part with something that was precious to them because it really was the tangible link with a special event in their lives. So we had to hunt out substitutes of track down abstruse items belonging to the period in question.

Can you give us some examples?
Sure. The bicycle wheel for example. Philip had obviously not been carrying a dirty old English bicycle wheel around with him for thirty years, but we found a bicycle shop in Mestre (thin on the ground in Venice, for obvious reasons) that had a stack of them, and the set of Dante had been his grandfather’s (a literary admiral!).

The yellow taxi was sent by post from New York, but managed to get kidnapped in Milan by a paediatrician who maybe gave it to some child in difficulty, or that’s what I like to think, but that’s another story, maybe even another new beginning . . . So Federico, the long-suffering author of that story, patiently sent me another, which in turn got held up by the Customs and only arrived in
my letterbox on the morning of the opening. A cliffhanger!
Anton Emilio on the other hand refused to hand over his precious 1987 ticket to a Madonna concert, saying he kept it in a very safe place, a safe safe even. But we managed to source instead a single of – inevitably – Into the Groove from that year.
Alessia’s cathartic moment was inextricably linked to Mendelssohn’s Fifth Symphony, so we had that playing in the background during the show.
As for myself, I had carried away from that much-enjoyed Museum of Broken Relationships only the idea of my show and couple of souvenirs that didn’t really lend themselves to exhibition as outward and visible signs of a change of course. Luckily, Lia, a friend who had been with me on that trip and a bit of a hoarder, had kept her entrance ticket, which was impeccably part of the museum. So that stood for my own Anew story.

So the object was more crucial than the story?
Not always. They are very closely linked of course, and sometimes it seems to be the object that makes the story, sometimes the opposite. At the event, we discovered it was very subjective: some people seemed to find a story so strong that they were a little disappointed by the object; others might be attracted by an intriguing object but weren’t sure the story lived up to it. And these could be two people looking at the same thing.
Can you think of an example?
Well, generally some people were turned on by, say, love-stories, while others found them a bit banal. Some laughed out loud at the cemetery story while others thought it in terrible taste. Things strike different chords in all of us: our own past experiences condition whether we take things in this way or that. And certainly in that sense the show was a great success: it was just what I had hoped for – to get people personally involved enough to want to criticise and comment and suggest to the extent that they would say: ‘If it were me, . . .’ And so we get to collect further stories.

Why don’t you give us one of the stories so we can have a better idea of the sort of thing you’re looking for?

I’ll give you two short ones, quite different from one another.

First, the young Japanese woman who ends up engaged to Alvise:

On holiday one May with Akihito: I had studied art history, how could I not to want to visit Europe? Our third port of call: Italy. In Venice, in a restaurant, the man at the next table helps us with precious information on the city. Alvise, with his faltering English, takes us to beautiful and hidden places. We, with our faltering English, thank him warmly.

Back in Tokyo I leave Akihito, without explanation. I write Alvise a letter of thanks. He replies. We
keep in touch via letters and phone calls, I take Italian classes, without telling anybody.

In June of the following year, Alvise comes to visit Tokyo. Two weeks later he takes me back with him to Venice. I only found out after we were married that while I was taking Italian classes, he had started a Japanese course.

Mitsuko, 2002

And then the American at the cemetery in the 1960s

35 years old, visits cemetery – beautiful day – very tranquil. Walks round a graveyard like a movie set. Pauses to look at the headstones for familial affinities or simply to admire their aesthetic qualities. Comes upon the stone of someone who died at 42. Walks faster looking at age of death: not that many who died under 45, but enough to change his life. The prospect of death is no longer theoretical. If he were to die right now? He’s the husband of the wrong woman, his career is meaningless, his time ill spent. That same year he left his job, his wife and his old style of life.

Lee – 1960

But there are also some very succinct ones, like this two-liner:
The nervous tinkling of her keys in front of the door to her house, the clumsy delay in opening it and her extremely shy smile in saying goodbye.

Mauro – 1998

Obviously the object there was a key. But what was great was that the author of the story brought along his fellow protagonist to the show and gave her the catalogue as a second declaration of love. She was bowled over, and we were happy too.

In short, the stories are very varied, and different people will warm to different ones. The main thing is that we have 42 diverse cues for change in the catalogue, and we’ve already started to collect new ones: oddly enough, all the most recent arrivals have to do with self-discovery.

You’re still looking then? There’s a future for Anew?

The idea was to put down a marker for a specific future, yes. The shining light at the end of the tunnel is still an Anew Museum. But to get there the exhibition route seems a useful one, gathering together objects and stories to inspire other stories in their turn, adding link on link to a long unbreakable chain, both here and abroad. A group of Columbian friends have recently proposed Bogotá, which would be an adventure in itself, but it may be the best thing is for Anew to keep its feet on the ground and build up a track record in Italy, at least for the time being.
What’s the next step then? What do you need to carry on?

It won’t come as a surprise that we’re up against it financially. The expenses so far have been met by Anita and me, but if we’re to move around there will be the costs of travelling and transporting and staying somewhere, producing a new catalogue and more merchandising material, publicising, marketing, paying for a venue, setting up, and so on. We’re not talking about huge amounts here; we’re on a slightly smaller scale than the Hirst show! - but certainly, to get much further we’ll be needing a sponsor: one that believes in the project, obviously, and might want to tell his or her own new beginning and become an integral part of the ongoing Anew, how it begins/come comincia.

One last thing I should add. If the storyteller wants to remain anonymous (we have already used pseudonyms where requested), that’s fine – particularly if it helps them to tell a stronger, no-hold-barred, more personal story.

But then there’s the example of Elena, who with the aid of a bottle of wine too many, finally shook off, without mincing words, a “friend” who had become increasing burdensome and hypocritical. In her case though, the feeling of relief and renewal that ensued was so strong that she has
insisted in signing off the episode with her real name!

Anew
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VERSIONE ITALIANA