Chinese artist Ai Weiwei is blunt. When he wanted to make a political statement about crackdowns on dissent, he brought portraits of 176 political prisoners to one of America’s most infamous high-security federal prisons. “Trace,” first shown at Alcatraz prison off the San Francisco Bay in 2014, opened Wednesday in Washington for a six-month run at the Hirshhorn museum. More than 1.2 million Lego bricks were assembled by hand to form the individual portraits, arranged on the floor in Ai’s latest subversion of readymade materials.

Several of the “prisoners of conscience” chosen by Ai-himself held under house arrest without charge for three months in 2011 and banned from traveling outside China until 2015 — are likely to trigger debate in the United States. Edward Snowden and Chelsea Manning, behind some of the biggest leaks of classified documents in US history, share the first of six zones of 30 portraits with historical figures like Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr, as well as Shaker Aamer, a Saudi citizen and British resident held at Guantanamo Bay without trial or charge for more than 13 years until 2015. One of the “Trace” protagonists, former CIA officer turned whistleblower John Kiriakou, was among those who attended Ai’s first ever public talk in Washington late Tuesday.

The artist-who was interrogated more than 50 times during his house arrest for alleged tax evasion—explained he had “wanted to do something related to prisoners who lost their freedom because of their beliefs, because they had different ideas or opinions.” “I have this understanding about why certain society doesn’t like art, or hate people who have this freedom in terms of thinking or expressing themselves,” said Ai. “But for me, this is the most important part of art.” —AFP

Some of Ai Weiwei’s Trace at Hirshhorn exhibition is seen at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC. The portraits laying on the floor are made from Legos. — AFP

LA City Council okns plans for George Lucas museum

The Force was with George Lucas on Tuesday as the Los Angeles City Council moved with lightsaber speed to clear the way for a $1.5 billion Museum of Narrative Art the “Star Wars” creator plans to build down the road from his alma mater. After hearing from Lucas himself, the council voted 14-0 to approve an environmental impact report and other requirements for the museum’s construction adjacent to the University of Southern California. “For a very brief time I actually grew up here,” said Lucas, who earned a degree in film from USC. “That’s where I learned my craft. Basically where I started my career was in school here.”

Lucas said his museum won’t just focus on movies, however, but on the entire history of narrative storytelling, from the days of cave painting to digital film. “I realized that the whole concept of narrative art has been forgotten,” he told the council. With Tuesday’s approval, plans are to break ground in Exposition Park, south of downtown, as early as this year and open the museum to the public in 2021. The city says the project will cost taxpayers nothing because Lucas and his wife, Mellody Hobson, are footing the bill. “It is the largest private gift in our city, in our state or in our nation’s history,” said Councilman Curren D Price Jr, whose district takes in the park.

It will feature all forms of narrative storytelling, said the museum’s president, Don Bacigalupi. He said its exhibits will include story boards, costumes, props and various other elements that went into making “Casablanca,” “The Wizard of Oz” and other classic films. And, yes, there will be plenty of cool “Star Wars” stuff there too. “Everything from Luke Skywalker’s first lightsaber to Darth Vader’s costume and helmet,” said Bacigalupi. The Lucas-Steven Spielberg “Indiana Jones” films also will be represented. Numerous interactive programs for children, film students, academics and others will be offered.

Lucas said he hopes the museum will serve as inspiration to people of all ages, but especially to children, encouraging them to create a better world. Popular art, he said, is the glue that holds people together, that teaches them that while we may have different aspirations we have similar aspirations. In addition to USC, the Museum of Narrative Art will be within close proximity to the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, the California Science Center and the California African American Museum. Although Lucas’s affection for USC is clear - he and his foundation have given the school tens of millions of dollars over the years - it was once assumed he’d put his museum in his hometown of San Francisco. Or if not there, then his wife’s hometown of Chicago.

But when it came time to clear away all the bureaucratic hurdles, just like the upstart Rebel Alliance in “Star Wars,” it was Los Angeles that prevailed. “I wanted to put it in my hometown. They said no. Mellody wanted to put it in her hometown. They said no. We were both basically heartbroken,” Lucas said. “And then we said, ‘All right, let’s clear the boards and find a place that really wants it.’” — AP