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Steve Kuhn and his daughters Zoe, left, and Eva filled out fictional passport applications with the artist Erika Harrsch on Saturday.

Artist's Installation Creates a World Without Borders

By JULIE TURKEWITZ

In a quiet museum in a placid Connecticut community, Lee Walther, 72, is shrieking. She clasps her hands in an Oscar-winning pose, then throws them wildly toward the air. She has just discovered that she has won a passport from the United States of North America, which will allow her to travel anywhere in the world.

Of course, the passport is from a fictional country. Both the passport and the country are part of an interactive art installation created by Erika Harrsch, a Queens artist. With immigration once again on the national agenda, Ms. Harrsch has been likening a visit to an immigration office to the experience of walking onto the set of a game show — as a contestant.

On Saturday, Ms. Harrsch was at the Aldrich Contemporary Art Museum in Ridgefield, Conn., with her project, "United States of North America Passport." Her installation envisions a borderless North American continent — a fictitious entity called the United States of North America — and encourages museum visitors to apply for a passport that will make them citizens.

Once an application has been completed, Ms. Harrsch, playing the role of bureaucrat, invites applicants to spin a wheel to determine their fate.

Spin to "You Win" and Ms. Harrsch, 42, hands over a passport, which confers the privilege to travel throughout the world. Land on "Illegal Alien" and she keeps that golden ticket locked in her slate-gray, Soviet-style desk.

The game, she said, places participants into the vulnerable position of the millions of people who try to leave their countries every year. "I was thinking of how to create something that would actually make it touchable, this lottery process," Ms. Harrsch said. "Something that is so heavy can be so difficult to approach."

Ms. Walther's joy on Saturday gives, perhaps, a hint of what it feels like to suddenly become one

of the relatively few with the freedom to move about the world.

Danes, for instance, can land in 169 countries or territories without ever applying for a visa, according to Henley & Partners, a law firm that analyzes visa regulations every year. American born? No problem. You can pass 166 borders without prior approval.

Born in Somalia or Afghanistan? Fewer than 30 nations allow you to enter without a visa.

"Passport," however, isn't just about helping passport-carrying Americans understand the experiences of others. By pointing to — even mocking — the seemingly arbitrary nature of the laws that govern borders, Ms. Harrsch could so subtly suggest that we could live without them. "Borders are created by the mind," she said. "Not by nature, not by instinct."

Ms. Harrsch is originally from Mexico City and knows something about the process. She arrived in New York on a tourist visa just weeks before Sept. 11, 2001, carrying just a suitcase and hoping to pursue an artistic career in the heart of the creative world, she said.

She applied for an O-1 visa, a special residency permit for artists, athletes and scientists. After she submitted "a bible full of documents," immigration officials granted her the visa, officially deemed her an "alien with extraordinary abilities," and allowed her to stay for six years.

In 2007, she spun the lottery wheel again, won a green card, and was promoted to resident alien. The years leading up to that, however, were fraught with anxiety.

While in Mexico waiting to learn if she would be granted a permanent visa, she began filming monarch butterflies, which travel approximately 3,000 miles every year from Canada to Mexico. "I'm literally lying on the floor, filming the butterflies" in Michoacán, she said. "I realized,

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they're doing exactly my same route, but they're so free."

At that, "Passport" was born. The monarch butterfly has since become a central theme of the project, and the cover of Ms. Harrsch's fantasy passport combines the designs of United States, Canadian and Mexican documents with an image of a butterfly. She envisions a world in which people travel as easily as monarchs, following the opportunities that each land has to offer.

Of course, not everyone agrees with such a proposal. "I think that's very dangerous, absolutely dangerous," said Elena Roman, 65, who spun the wheel on Saturday. Ms. Roman said that as a United States citizen, she had

traveled easily to Costa Rica, Egypt, Italy, Morocco, Turkey and at least half a dozen other nations. But she could not envision opening this country to foreign travelers in a similarly free way. "I would love that the future would have that," she said. "But as the world is right now, with all the hatred and all the guns and all the animosity, it's not the time."

She continued, "Everybody is trying to get some of this pie, and I think we need to look after our own."

Ms. Harrsch has traveled the country with the exhibit, and shown it in China, Mexico and Poland. In the United States, activists and undocumented immigrants sometimes approach her. "They say, 'If this is a serious issue, why are you losing your time doing an art project? Do something for real,'" she said. "It's not for me to speak with a loud voice to anybody. It's for me more to speak to communities that bring this to the attention of leaders. It's very difficult to approach leaders, and easier to approach the world."

Lottery Numbers

Feb. 24, 2013

Midday New York Numbers — 813; Lucky Sum — 12
 Midday New York Win 4 — 6058; Lucky Sum — 19
 New York Numbers — 598; Lucky Sum — 22
 New York Win 4 — 6579; Lucky Sum — 27
 New York Take 5 — 5, 7, 14, 15, 22
 New York Pick 10 — 1, 2, 11, 23, 32, 39, 41, 42, 45, 47, 49, 51, 53, 54, 58, 66, 68, 70, 72, 73
 Midday New Jersey Pick 3 — 461
 Midday New Jersey Pick 4 — 7061
 New Jersey Pick 3 — 713

New Jersey Pick 4 — 2845
 New Jersey Cash 5 — 13, 21, 33, 34, 35
 Connecticut Midday 3 — 105
 Connecticut Midday 4 — 7138
 Connecticut Daily — 027
 Connecticut Play 4 — 8442
 Connecticut Cash 5 — 1, 6, 8, 12, 15

Feb. 23, 2013

New York Lotto — 1, 13, 16, 24, 32, 57; Bonus, 27
 New York Take 5 — 15, 25, 31, 35, 36
 Connecticut Daily — 939
 Connecticut Play 4 — 1992
 Connecticut Cash 5 — 2, 12, 14, 24, 32
 Powerball — 2, 5, 31, 39, 41; powerball, 29