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‘White Only’ Signs in Art Project at SUNY Buffalo Draw Concern

By ELIZABETH A. HARRIS SEPT. 19, 2015

A graduate student at the State University of New York at Buffalo hung “black only” and “white only” signs around campus this week as part of an art project, which she said was intended to provoke a searing conversation.

And indeed it did. The signs shocked students and jolted the university at a time when discussions about race and race relations have been prominent in the news.

The student, Ashley Powell, who is enrolled in the university’s Art Department, began posting the signs, made of cardboard and paper, shortly before noon on Wednesday, she said, hanging 17 of them in several buildings on campus, next to elevators, water fountains, benches and bathrooms.

Within about an hour, university police began receiving phone calls from alarmed students, according to a student newspaper, The Spectrum. Some students called the signs traumatic and said they made them feel unsafe.



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This was posted on a public bathroom at UB. Not only is this a hate crime, but it is also an act of terrorism.

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At a meeting of the Black Student Union on Wednesday night where students talked about the signs, Ms. Powell, who is black, announced that she

was responsible for them. She described her project, called "Our Compliance," as an effort "to expose white privilege."

"Our society still actively maintains racist structures that benefit one group of people, and oppress another," Ms. Powell said in a statement. "Forty to fifty years ago, these structures were visibly apparent and physically graspable through the existence of signs that looked exactly like the signs I put up. Today these signs may no longer exist, but the system that they once reinforced still does."

Her statement continued: "I apologize for the extreme trauma, fear and actual hurt and pain these signs brought about. I apologize if you were hurt, but I do not apologize for what I did."

Ms. Powell, a 25-year-old from Chicago, is in her second year of a two-year art program at the university. As part of a class called "Installation: Urban Space," students were asked to create an installation near the campus arts center about time.

For people who are not white, Ms. Powell said in an interview, time has, in many ways, stood still.

Since the deaths of Eric Garner on Staten Island and Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., both unarmed black men who died at the hands of police, "black lives matter" has become a rallying cry, and issues of race, especially in policing, have commanded significant attention.

On Friday, John DellaContrada, a spokesman for the university, released a statement in response to Ms. Powell's project.

"On a daily basis our faculty and students explore sensitive and difficult topics in an environment that values freedom of expression, and this week's student art project is generating considerable dialogue," Mr. DellaContrada said. "The university is encouraging our community to discuss how we

negotiate the boundaries of academic freedom in a safe and inclusive environment.”

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