pzazz



BRUT

KINGA JACZEWSKA

Brutalism in the flesh



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Gezien op 14 oktober 2025
Stuk, Leuven

Kinga Jaczewska’s 'Brut' explores the material logic of concrete through the bodies that live under the weight of its looming, brutalist shadows. On the surface, 60 minutes of movements follow the regular patterns of a stage performance. Yet, much like the architecture it takes its inspiration from, the geometrical logic of the piece on closer inspection reveals surprising angles and unexpected beauty. In essence, the piece is a relentless and uncompromising act of precise bodily constructions. This aesthetic choice fully resonates throughout the piece, in which communal history and lived, intimate memories intertwine in an ever-changing never-unravelled gestural knot.

16 OKTOBER 2025

Jaczewska is no newcomer to these themes. A strong interest in brutalist architecture and the relationship between bodies and the environment has shaped several of her previous works, such as “GREY” and “Dry Dances”. In his review of the latter, architect and Pzazz writer Pieter T’Jonck delves into the historical background of Jaczewska’s obsession with the brutalist aesthetics. There is the communist version Jaczewska knew from Poland, her country of birth: rudimentary prefab blocks that once were meant to house the obedient citizens of a collective dream. Western-Europe developed its own, socially progressive version, using - in the style of Le Corbusier - rough formwork to express a society to come. Jaczewska, who grew up within the former cement-shaped reality, constantly reconciles between the two imageries: between the (post)-utopian decaying structures of socialist ideology and the intimate familiarity of a home.

There is no doubt that this is a piece that requires a certain setting. The austere and intricate concrete shapes of the walls and ceiling of STUK's Soetezaal suit this theme perfectly. Before the mind's eye, decades of slowly eroding constructivist functionality and décor flash like a highlight reel. These walls make a fourth co-performer in Jaczewska's performance, together with the creator herself, Anne-Lene Noldner and Maisie Woodford.

At the beginning of the performance, the three women stand before us, dressed in grey coveralls with their hair short or tucked in tight knots, giving them an androgynous quality. Their gazes meet each other; they scan the audience from one side to other; and ultimately, they observe the walls and shapes of the building around them. An additional 'fake wall' in the form of a long paper curtain hangs silently in the middle of the stage. It is grey too, and unassuming at first glance, but somehow growing in presence with its rough, grey persistence. At first the dancers stay still. Their bodies seem to listen to the environment before they move. Only their breathing and quiet gazes give a sense of the bodily softness hidden under the slow engineering of presence. This will be a recurrent non-motion in the performance, a restraint as an in-between moment. As the ominous music (Raphael Malfliet) seeps through the loudspeakers, they start to move, entering a long-lasting 'game' that will continue till the end of their exploration: falling into a step forward, a shift of the hip, a step backwards... and so on.

Light plays the role of an architect in this work. To start with, we bask in the amber warmth of yellow streetlights on an autumn evening, while the noises of distant street-life and a barking dog fill the air. Gradually the light cools to a stark industrial white. Later, in fleeting intervals, the yellow and white alternate, forming a subtle dance of shadows. Within these transitions, the dancers' greyness begins to slip away: under their grim sleeves and collars emerge hints of red, yellow, and blue, primary coloured clothing - as a nod to Le Corbusier's disciplined palette - hidden beneath the flatness of 'neutrality'.

Their movements are a constant negotiation between stillness and agency.

Yet, for all the evocative ambience, this is a corporeal work more than anything. Their movements are a constant negotiation between stillness and agency. Each moment of leaning forward, each micro-pause suspended in gravity, becomes an anticipation. Someone always cuts the stillness, an almost invisible tilt that provokes the next motion. What Jaczewska offers here is a tightly knit system of intra-actions. The dancers are not moving for a cause or a problem, but for the sake of the movement itself: configurations, reconfigurations, pairs and trios dissolve into solitary walk. The choreography is minutious, and formally precise at first, and it is built through a repetition of gestures connected to each of the dancers. They repeat their movements or poses in variations without a clear meaning, just like materials, deconstructing the deconstruction.

When the music accelerates, the bodies respond. One performer's hand rises and as if resisting something moves towards the ground, while another performer frames her head in a sharp triangle. Somewhere around the middle of the piece, I sense this gesture transforming into a recognisable meaning. The movements are now repeated in pair, and we see the dancers jostle or drag each other in a scene depicting violence: the previously detached movements now become a symbolic scene of state power: The police brutally arresting someone.

The bodies fall to the floor as if dead. This feels like a natural end.

Yet the piece refuses to stay within the comfort of easily digestible symbolism. It resists interpretation and insists on our careful attention. As if nothing happened, the dancers return to the vocabulary they just dismantled, as if rebuilding a ruin without blueprints. Movements become freer and more fluid; breathing becomes heavier; humour slips through fatigue; but their faces remain unreadable. We are faced with their gaze, but I am not sure how to react. Are we analysed, are we judged, or should we be scared? When they leap toward us with hands cutting through the air, we flinch, only for them to freeze before contact. The attempt is unclear, like everything else. And this may be precisely the point.

Jaczewska's method, drawn from *béton brut*, translates the roughness of architecture into corporeal rhythms. An ending is as abrupt as a power cut. Everything turns dark, just to reveal the very same stage embraced by the walls. What remains is grey, that most unassuming of colours, the one through which all others must pass. It holds both the impenetrable and the tender, the collective and the individual. It is monolithic yet permeable, cold yet carrying heat. Walls, forms and bodies. In other words, 'Brut' teaches us that movement, like concrete, is a matter of weight, of how much history a body can hold before it cracks, or begins, finally, to breathe.