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DECEMBER

CULTURE

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TRENDS

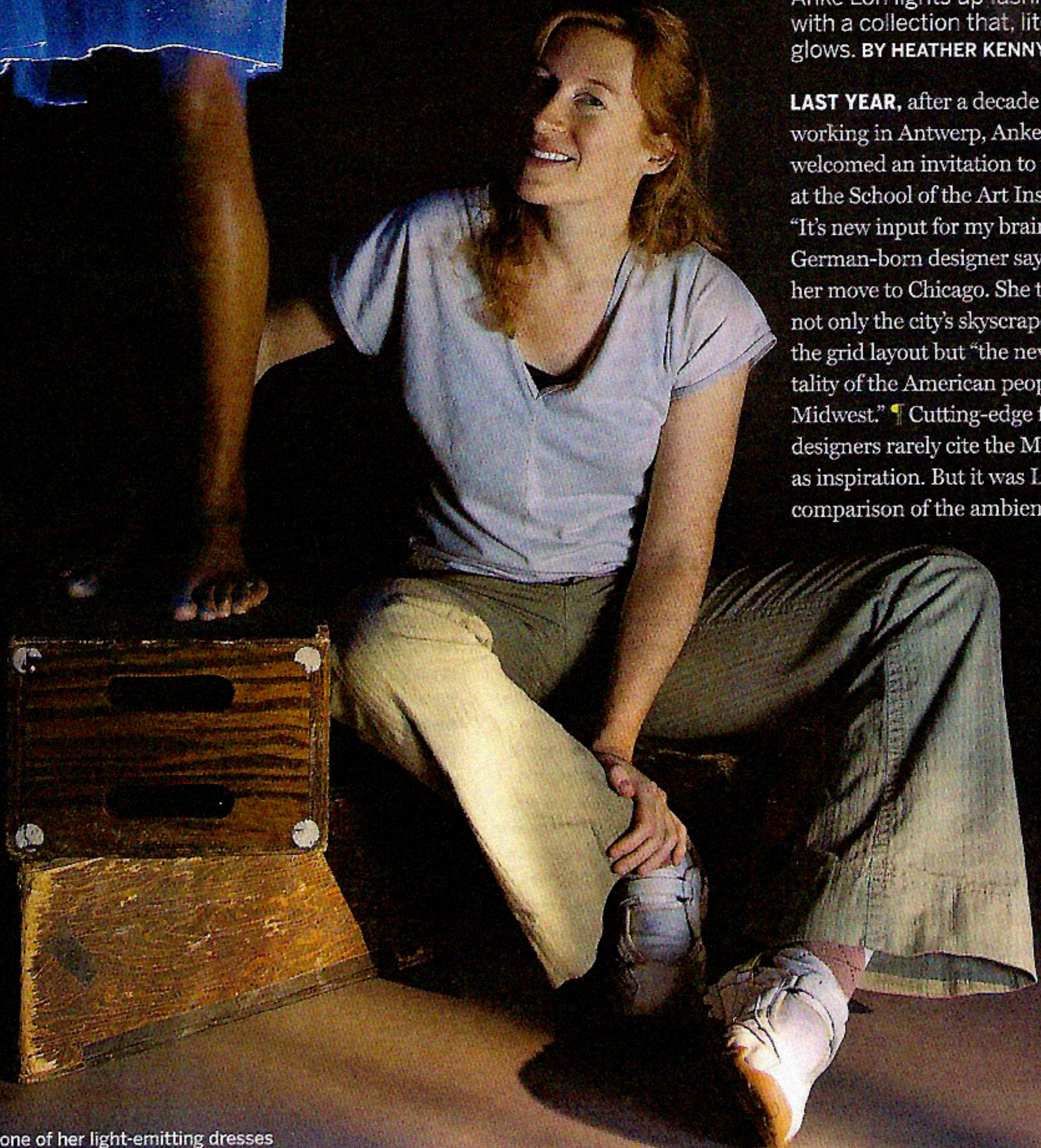
EDITED BY CASSIE WALKER

STARTER

The Body Electric

Anke Loh lights up fashion with a collection that, literally, glows. BY HEATHER KENNY

LAST YEAR, after a decade spent working in Antwerp, Anke Loh welcomed an invitation to teach at the School of the Art Institute. "It's new input for my brain," the German-born designer says of her move to Chicago. She ticks off not only the city's skyscrapers and the grid layout but "the new mentality of the American people, the Midwest." Cutting-edge fashion designers rarely cite the Midwest as inspiration. But it was Loh's comparison of the ambient



>> Anke Loh with one of her light-emitting dresses



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lighting of two cities—Antwerp's soft glow versus Chicago's starker illumination—that inspired her to start incorporating lighting into clothes. She integrates optical fibers, reflective yarn, and, most startling, a "photonic textile" that transforms a simple black dress into a moving, pixelating screen. One design features a graphic of the el by local video artist Nathan Peck. "I just look for something that is fresh to me," she says.

Now 33 and living in Wicker Park, Loh has challenged assumptions about fashion ever since she was a teenager in her tiny hometown of Lippstadt. At 13, she started dressing rebelliously: "Everybody got upset, so I had what I wanted," she says. Loh went on to graduate from the prestigious Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Antwerp, whose distinguished alumni—including Ann Demeulemeester, Martin Margiela, and Dries Van Noten—transformed the small Belgian city into a fashion powerhouse in the eighties.

Loh worked for Margiela—whom she calls "my hero"—in Paris, but eventually moved back to Antwerp to start her own collection. Like the work of her Belgian counterparts, Loh's designs take a more intellectual approach to fashion—pieces wrap around the body asymmetrically or have gaping slits in unexpected places. Says Nick Cave, chair of SAIC's fashion design department: "She's sort of forcing us to reevaluate dress."

"I don't have a certain kind of typical beauty in my head, not at all," says Loh, whose boundary-pushing projects—such as a dress top spun with a reflective yarn normally used for building insulation—aren't destined for ready-to-wear anytime soon. "I'm more interested if there is some kind of disturbance." ■