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Dresses from high-tech fabric light up catwalk

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CHICAGO - It's one thing to light up the catwalk with innovative design, but what about producing designs that actually light up the catwalk?

Philips, the Dutch electronics giant, and German fashion designer Anke Loh aim to try.

Loh this week launched a new collection, "Dressing Light," in which each garment incorporates Philips' new photonic fabric -- which has arrays of light-emitting diodes that can display text, graphics and animation.

"I had the idea of putting different lights into clothing and seeing what kind of moving images and atmosphere I could create," Loh told reporters.

Loh honed her craft in Antwerp, Belgium, and is an assistant professor of fashion design at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

Her collection is the first use of Philips' light-emitting fabric, known as Lumalive, which was developed as a research project in 2005 and turned into a business enterprise this year. Commercial Lumalive products are likely to debut in 2007 and could extend to home and office furniture as well as clothing.

At Loh's show, the models wore black-and-white silk dresses with embedded Lumalive swatches, and small packs -- about the size of mobile phones -- powering the system.

Across their chests ran low-resolution videos of, for example, laughing faces and a stylised rendition of the Chicago "El," or elevated train line, complete with station names and a cartoon cityscape.

"It's not just a dress, it's not just technology. Together they speak with one another," Loh said.

Many observers have one thought upon seeing the collection: advertising gimmick. Some expect it will be used to put ads on clothing and furniture.

But Bas Zeper, managing director of photonic textiles at Philips Research, told Reuters that the company expects a broad scope of applications, especially in the performing arts.

"The domain of dance and stage performance is one of the many we expect to move naturally into the space," he said.

Ultimately the images could be voice or movement triggered, and the whole ensemble could be hooked up to MP3 players, or to Bluetooth or other wireless technologies to receive internet signals.

Wearable stock quotes, anyone?

- REUTERS

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